French as a foreign language learners' metacognitive strategy: A comparative study between Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam

Dwiyanto Djoko Pranowo[1]*, Roswita Lumban Tobing[1], and Cong Tran Van[2]

[1]Departemet of French Language Education, Faculty of Language, Art, and Culture, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Jl. Kolombo No.1, Depok, Sleman, Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia
[2]Departement de langue française, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Metacognition is central to language learning because it encompasses the processes that govern the efficient use of learning strategies. It is especially important as a way to address language learners' issues of limited repertoire of strategies and their application. While much research on language learning strategies have been related to the learning of English, this study observes the increasingly appealing French as an additional language hence French as a Foreign Language (FFL) is gaining importance. This research was carried out by examining some similarities and differences in models of learning strategies of FLE students in three ASEAN countries. The present study aims to investigate into FFL learners' metacognitive strategies which contribute to the development of learners' autonomy, despite the different contexts of study in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. This study is descriptive qualitative research involving 56 students from three universities in Bangkok (Thailand), Hanoi (Vietnam) and Yogyakarta (Indonesia) as an ad-hoc sample to study their French Language Education (FLE) learning strategies. Using a Metacognitive Strategy Questionnaire (MSQ), this study result in a few insights of FFL learning process. The participants showed a consistent metacognitive strategy in terms of planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Even though they are located in different countries, these strategies are proved to contribute to their autonomy as an FFL learner with different specificities.

Keywords: French as foreign language (FFL); learner's autonomy; learning strategies; metacognitive strategy

INTRODUCTION

The advancements in technology brought by the 4.0 Industrial Revolution have significantly enhanced the accessibility of foreign language learning for people around the world. This technological development has enabled learners to access a wide range of resources, including websites and applications that offer various learning materials, exercises, and tests (Grimus, 2020; Haleem et al., 2022; Zhang & Chang, 2016). Additionally, these tools also help language learners by providing support with dialects, expressions, and other challenges that arise when learning a new language (Veszelszki, 2017; Yuming, 2017). Furthermore, these developments have introduced innovative platforms that utilize digital technologies, allowing learners to experience interactive lessons that simulate the experience of learning with native speakers of the target language (Kessler, 2018; Pokrivcakova, 2019). However, despite the numerous benefits brought by these technological advancements, effective language learning requires more than just access to resources (Ryan, 2014) in which learning demands the implementation of strategic learning strategies.

*Corresponding author
Email: dwiyanto@uny.ac.id

The concept of language learning strategies has been extensively explored and defined by various researchers such as by Wenden and Rubin (1987), Richards and Platt (1992), and Faerch and Kasper (1983), all of which emphasize that language learning strategies is the intentional actions, steps, and routines that learners use to facilitate the acquisition, storage, and use of information. These strategies help learners better comprehend, learn, or retain new information and are used to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) further categorize language learning strategies into three main types: cognitive, metacognitive, and affective or social strategies. Among these, metacognitive strategies, which were first introduced by the American psychologist John Flavell, have had a significant impact on the field of language learning, particularly in the area of learning strategies (Zhang & Guo, 2020). Metacognition is considered central to effective learning because it encompasses the processes that govern the efficient use of learning strategies, which are fundamental to intelligent learning behavior (Wenden, 1987). The importance of metacognitive strategies lies in their ability to address one of the primary reasons some language learners' struggle: a limited repertoire of strategies or the improper application of these strategies (Wenden, 1987). Metacognitive strategies, also known as regulatory skills, are crucial for enhancing learning outcomes as they involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating the success of learning activities (Liu, 2020). Specifically, these strategies include activities such as planning (which involves advance organizers, directed attention, functional planning, selective attention, and self-management), monitoring (which includes checking and modifying students' comprehension during language tasks), and evaluating (which involves assessing the outcomes of one's language learning efforts) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1989).

Like any foreign language, learning French can significantly enhance career prospects, particularly in international business. French is widely spoken in many countries, including France, Belgium, Switzerland, parts of Canada, and numerous African nations. Additionally, as the third most widely used business language globally, proficiency in French can open job opportunities in various sectors. This makes learning French as a Foreign Language (FFL) increasingly important. However, just as in any foreign language learning context, one of the biggest challenges in FFL classrooms is engaging students who are disengaged from the learning process. Further, often, students learning a second or foreign language learn the language in an environment that has little exposure to the language outside the classroom (Winskel et al., 2017), noting an importance of increasing the language exposure.

However, Piechurska-Kuciel et al. (2017) argue that a routine approach is insufficient to attain language proficiency since language acquisition involves not only cognitive challenges but also personal and sociocultural ones. Individual differences such as motivation, language aptitude, self-determination, personality, and anxiety play significant roles in L2 learning and usage (MacIntyre et al., 2007).

In the Indonesian context, learning French as a foreign language presents unique challenges. Darmawangsa et al. (2020) note that French is less accepted as a foreign language in Indonesia due to the small number of learners and speakers. Additionally, compared to other foreign languages like English, French is less popular and less exposed in Indonesian society since the language is typically offered only at the high school and college levels in formal education institutions, which further limits its reach (see Hardini, 2019; Kusnandar, 2019). These factors contribute to the broader challenge of motivating students to learn and use French in Indonesia. Similarly, in Thailand, the role of French as a foreign language has been declining, including within the educational context (Huang, 2020). He further noted that although French remains an important foreign language in secondary schools and universities, and historically held the position of the second most studied foreign language in Thailand after English due to France's influence in Southeast Asia before World War II, its prominence has diminished. English has become the sole language of ASEAN, and other Asian languages such as Japanese and Mandarin have gained importance due to their significant roles in global politics and economics, impacting foreign language policy in Thailand's education system (Huang, 2020). In Vietnam, the situation mirrors both countries, with French as a foreign language seeing a decline over the past decades. The provision of English language education has grown significantly in Vietnam, both in quantity and quality, with estimates suggesting that about 90% of foreign language learners have chosen to study English (Do, 2006). Although other foreign languages like French, Chinese, and Japanese are also offered as options, the majority of students opt for English to improve their job prospects, qualify for promotions, or pursue overseas studies (Albright, 2018). This preference further exacerbates the decline in French language learning in Vietnam.

Considering the declining role, limited exposure, and learning time for French as a foreign language (FFL), this underscores the importance of metacognitive strategies in enhancing language acquisition. In this context, research on the use of metacognitive strategies in learning French as a second or foreign language has yielded positive results. For example, Halim et al. (2017) examined Malaysian students' perceptions of the learning strategies they employed while studying French and

Japanese. The study involved 100 students which aims to identify similarities and differences in the strategies used by students learning French and Japanese. The findings revealed that students of both languages frequently employed cognitive and metacognitive strategies, while affective and memory strategies were used less often. This research highlights the critical role of metacognitive strategies in language learning and suggests that educators should be aware of the different strategies learners use, tailoring their teaching approaches to support and enhance these strategies for more effective language acquisition.

Another study by Rabadi et al. (2020) investigated the use of metacognitive reading strategies among 240 fourth-year students majoring in English Language and Literature or French Language and Literature at Jordanian universities. The findings revealed that both English and French language learners reported moderate use of metacognitive reading strategies, with a particular preference for Global reading strategies (M= 3.06) over Support (M= 3.01) and Problem Solving (M= 2.88) strategies. The study also found significant differences in the categories of metacognitive reading strategies used between the two groups. Importantly, the results suggested that while foreign language learners may recognize which strategies to employ, they may lack the knowledge of how to use these strategies effectively. This indicates a need for instruction not only on which strategies to use but also on how to apply them correctly. Similarly, Ahmad (2023) explored the effectiveness of integrating metacognitive components—Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation—into vocabulary learning for Malaysian university students through an eight-week intervention program. The study sought to determine whether these metacognitive components could enhance students' French vocabulary acquisition. The experiment involved three classes, with 45 students in total: 21 students in the experimental group, who were taught using lessons embedded with metacognitive components, and 24 students in the control group, who were taught using conventional methods without metacognitive elements. The results demonstrated the effectiveness of metacognitive components, as the experimental group outperformed the control group in post-intervention vocabulary tests, confirming that incorporating metacognitive strategies significantly benefited vocabulary learning.

Given the results, it is crucial for FFL learners to develop an awareness of metacognitive strategies, as these strategies empower them to take greater control of their own learning process, thereby fostering Learner Autonomy (Holec, 1981). By incorporating self-directed strategies such as metacognitive approaches, learners become more proactive in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, setting clear goals, and selecting the strategies that best align with their individual learning needs. As highlighted by Benson (2006, 2007), this autonomy not only enhances the overall learning experience but also equips learners with essential tools for managing their language acquisition more effectively. Through this process, learners are better able to retain and apply the language skills they acquire, leading to more successful outcomes in their language learning.

In light of the potential benefits of applying metacognitive strategies in learning French as a foreign language, studies within the Indonesian FFL context have been relatively scarce, especially when compared to other countries such as Thailand and Vietnam. This lack of research highlights a gap in understanding how these strategies could be effectively implemented in Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam's unique educational setting. Therefore, this study seeks to delve into FFL learners' metacognitive strategies which contribute to the development of learners' autonomy amidst the different settings for learners from the three different countries.

METHOD
This study is descriptive qualitative research involving 56 students from three universities: Kasetsart University in Bangkok (Thailand), Hanoi University (Vietnam), and Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (Indonesia). Further, this study involved students in their 4th, 6th semester, or higher, with French language proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1 (intermediate) according to the CEFR language proficiency framework. The sample was purposefully selected to meet the research needs, focusing on students enrolled in French Language Education (FLE) courses, whether in oral or written production, or oral or written comprehension.

The data collection was conducted between May and June 2020, using a questionnaire that took approximately 7 to 10 minutes to fill in. The questions were developed on the basis of Metacognitive Strategy Questionnaire (MSQ), adapted from Zhang and Seepho's (2013) instrument. The questionnaire comprises 20 items designed to assess the types of metacognitive strategies employed by FFL learners from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Participants were asked to rate their use of various metacognitive strategies on a three-point Likert scale, where the options ranged from "No, Never" (NN), to "Yes, Sometimes" (YS), and "Yes, Often or Always" (YOA). The detailed structure of the questionnaire is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Metacognitive Strategy Evaluation Grid

Metacognitive process	Metacognitive strategies	Questionaire number	Sum of items
Planning	Anticipation and planning	1, 10, 14, 20	4
	General attention	5, 16	2
	Identification of a problem	11, 12, 19	3
Monitoring	Selective attention	8, 17	2
	Self management	3, 4, 6,9	4
	Self-regulation	7, 13, 18	3
Evaluating	Self evaluation	2, 15	2
		Total items	20

The data were analyzed statistically to identify and map the metacognitive strategies employed by FFL learners. Additionally, the analysis aimed to compare the usage patterns of these strategies among FFL learners from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, highlighting any similarities or differences in their metacognitive strategies to French language learning. The data analysis is conducted to focus on the elements of metacognitive strategies as suggested by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), in which learners control their language learning process by planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning. The results of the analysis were used to inform the participants learning autonomy through which they oversee, regulate or self-direct their language learning. Further, the data were useful to explain various processes such as planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Metacognitive strategies and their implementation in planning, monitoring and evaluating learning
The first part of the data analysis process involved the quantitative aspects of the study. The overall process was intended to obtain the overview of the metacognitive strategies employed by the participants in their FFL learning process. While the research findings confirmed that the participants employed metacognitive strategies in their FFL learning, the analysis also showed that they were utilized differently by Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Thai learners. The discussion at this section starts from the highlighting viewpoints in the three different contexts.

The first data analysis highlight is focused on the Indonesian context. Indonesian participants showed an implementation of metacognitive strategies that impact on their understanding of the general situation in French learning. It has led them to be more prepared and directed, i.e. in facing any learning situations. From the data, 48% of students were reported to regularly plan and anticipate their learning of a new lesson. This question items

confirmed that the participants conducted planning, for example skimming and scanning the learning materials to get an overview of the general idea prior to the classroom activities. While anticipating is rather intangible, it means that the participants prepared themselves mentally before the class. To some extent, anticipation was useful to avoid making unnecessary mistakes and was actually a manifestation of learning.

In the next question items, it was found that almost half of the respondents (46%) reported to have paid close attention to general tasks and special instructions before doing any task in French learning. They admitted that they understood the general instruction to do the required tasks. Interestingly, almost equal number of participants (40%) reported that they only paid attention to the instructions occasionally and 13.75 % never paid attention to the learning tasks. In terms of learning management, the data analysis showed that 33% of the participants frequently managed their learning. 49% of the participants, on the other hand, only occasionally used this strategy. In this strategy, self-management in FFL covered the activities such as finding relevant subjects and course materials, creating a good environment, and using appropriate techniques for learning French.

Specific to FFL, the data shows that 55% of the participants paid attention to particular French learning tasks, compared to 32% who only used this strategy in a certain situation. In this strategy, particular attention was paid to learning French, including conducting documentary research. In addition, participants attentively listened to the speech of their interlocutor and made a conscious grasp of the grammatical orders of the speech. The data analysis also showed that a quarter of respondents, that is25.83% of participants, used the self-regulation technique frequently. This number is actually smaller than those who practiced self-regulation technique occasionally (48.83%), even the remaining 28.33% had never practiced it. Included in this strategy is the conscious taking of one's acquired aptitude and competence.

Table 2
Metacognitive Strategies Used by Indonesian Learners

No	Indicators	Item number	NN	YS	YOA	NN %	YS %	YOA %
1	Anticipation and planning	1, 10, 14, 20	5.5	12.25	19.25	13.75	38.1	48
2	General attention	5, 16	5.5	16	18.5	13,75	40	46
3	Selective attention	8, 17	5	13	22	12.5	32.5	55
4	Self management	3, 4, 6,9	6.75	19.75	13.5	16.875	49.4	33.75
5	Self-regulation	7, 13, 18	2.5	24.5	13	28.33	48.8	25.83
6	Identification of a problem	11, 12, 19	25	9.3	5.7	62.50	23.33	14
7	Self evaluation	2, 15	5.5	12.5	22	13.75	31.25	55
	Total	20						

Based on the quantification (Table 2), most of the participants in this region admitted that they have not developed a habit of identifying problems (62.52%). Only 15.17% of participants were found to regularly identify their problems and checked the materials of their learning such as verifying reached the learning goal. It is worth noting, however, that 55% of the participants conducted self evaluation but frequently checking their pronunciation and examining their language performance to find out their learning outcome.

The second highlight in the data analysis focuses on some differences between Indonesian students and Vietnamese students in using the metacognitive strategy, especially those related to self-evaluation strategies. Compared to the Indonesian counterpart, Vietnamese participants showed a percentage of 65% admitting that they often or always made preparations and planned to learn the French language. Following this, more than half of the Vietnamese participants paid general attention to their learning objectives (57%). In terms of specific choices, 60% of the participants actually paid attention to learning the required tasks. In the same vein, similar to the Indonesian participants, Vietnamese participants found it useful to pay close attention to general tasks and special instructions before doing a task of learning French as they understood the general instruction.

A good number of Vietnamese participants, i.e. 60%, specifically paid attention to particular French learning tasks such as documentary research. This bears the implication that they were serious in taking their French lesson. In other aspects, for example self-management techniques, 40% participants reported that they frequently used the strategies, followed by 35% of participants who occasionally used the strategy and 25% of participants who did not care about that strategy. Examples of strategies in these aspects are managing additional subjects and course materials, creating a good environment, and using appropriate techniques for learning French.

In addition, a few aspects of metacognitive strategies are used by around more than half of the Vietnamese participants. For example, 50% Vietnamese participants are frequently taking their acquired aptitude technique while 40% only did

some repetitions on some occasion as the self-regulation strategy. Then, 50% of Vietnamese participants regularly verified their problems of their learning French, such as how to achieve the goal. Finally, 40% of Vietnamese participants frequently did not do the self-assessment to know how their learning outcome are, e.g., checking their pronunciation and examining their language performance.

The third highlight of the data analysis was focused on Thai participants where they generally aced in the performance of self-management. The data show a different tendency for students in Indonesia and Vietnam. Thai participants seemed to generally manage their learning better. Not only did they always pay general or specific attention to the learning objectives, but also, they did it timely, when it was absolutely necessary. But 53% of participants did not always plan and anticipate what they were going to learn, such as scheduling lessons or preparing good presentations. They occasionally overlook how the results of learning French in the future would be. 60% of Thai participants occasionally paid attention to general tasks and special instructions before starting a new task. Then, 58% of Thai participants occasionally paid attention to particular tasks and a part of them used this strategy as they got into certain situations. This strategy includes documentary research and listening attentively to the speech of the interlocutor, creating a conscious grasp of the grammatical orders of speech.

On the other hand, a smaller number of Thai participants were found to have managed themselves more often by finding all additional subjects and course materials, creating a good environment, and using appropriate ways or techniques for learning French (40%). 30% of Thai participants always regulated themselves in a way of being conscious of one's acquired aptitude and competence. Additionally, 35% of Thai participants tried to identify the problems of their French learning process such as the achievement of the learning goal. 55% of Thai participants were also found to have assessed themselves in reaching their learning outcomes including checking their pronunciation and examining their language performance.

Impacts of metacognitive strategies on learners' autonomy

The research findings showed that metacognitive strategies were differently employed by Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Thai learners. While there is a possibility that the differences occur because of the influence of certain ways or techniques for learning French according to cultural background, our study was not designed to reveal this aspect. Instead, we draw some implications to the participants learning autonomy

In the contexts of our study, it is previously explained that the metacognitive strategy includes organizing, planning, targeting, and conditioning the learning of French. The data analysis showed that 48% of Indonesian learners, 65% of Vietnamese learners, and 23% Thai learners frequently and regularly fulfil the planning activities. Relevant to this finding, the importance of planning activities was stated by O'Malley and Chamot (1990, in Anderson, 2008) that only certain learners think about the importance of the planning, the progress and the goal of their learning. Our participants in the three different countries seem to have this similar quality, i.e. that they are good planners of their own learning. This underscores the importance of having a mental preparation prior to FFL learning. Therefore, an implication can be drawn that it is impossible not to plan or organize a language study, because learning success is determined by the selected metacognitive strategy.

But we also noticed that a small number of participants reported that they only occasionally engage in planning activities. Some learners think about the importance of the purpose, planning, progress, or end of this learning process while others do not. Activities and planned strategy are eventually carried out with different intensities and modifications. Some believe that it is best to leave the planning and organization of their learning to the teacher or the institution that offers them a well-planned program from the beginning to the end of the learning process.

Good language learners actually know what goals they are aiming for. For example, in terms of speaking, the range of targets can be explained by mutual intelligibility which is the main criterion. Good language learners therefore do not neglect their pronunciation. They learn how to pronounce FFL. They realized that this physical activity does not only involve exercises of the parts of the body (tongue, lips, vocal cords, lungs, etc.) but also the strategy of communication. It is true that some good learners develop the image of a good speaker of the French language as the goal of learning with good pronunciation, while others see from different ways who think that communication is more essential. From this type of learners, we can see that instead of using a compensatory strategy in communication

that advocates meaning, they put aside the form of utterance.

Another example is in listening activity where participants interact with spoken text. It is seen by good learners as part of communication activity. They did not take genuine care about mistakes or sounds they can't understand. They engaged in an activity that is extra-linguistic. They used a compensatory strategy by perceiving non-linguistic cues such as environment and social context or cultural cues. At the same time, they refer to contextual information in order to construct hypotheses about the meaning of the audio or written document. Learners also used schematic knowledge to grasp meaning, and this includes knowledge about the linguistic rule in which speech is organized, as well as how the language is used in a given society, and factual knowledge of the language.

Further, the analysis on the metacognitive strategies employed by the participants in the study also hints an important implication into their autonomy as language learners. Note that the participants of the study are the students in FFL courses. In this context, they play double roles as a member of a community practice in a classroom and as individual learners. In both situations, autonomy contributes to the success of the FFL studies. Conceptually, we understand learner autonomy as a situation in which learners take control of their learning process actively, implement personal choices, and make informed decisions about what how, and when they process their learning.

We have to set aside cultural background in this discussion as we have insufficient data regarding the culture. Instead, we read the pattern that the FFL learners from the three different countries have similar characteristics that lead to learning autonomously. The participants showed the qualities of a range of skills that they are responsible for their learning, including identifying and setting learning goals, planning and performing learning activities, being able to reflect on learning, understanding learning objectives, understanding own learning processes and applying different learning strategies in different situations.

In their roles as a member of community of practices in the classrooms and as individuals, learners should be flexible in positioning themselves. In the classroom where they have teachers as facilitators, they may gain support through well-designed classroom activities with a set of tasks and assignments that encourage autonomous learning. Autonomous learners in this situation would make the most of the learning experiences by involving themselves in making decisions for reaching their goals relevant to the set learning activities. In the situation where autonomous learners are not facilitated by the teachers, they would expand their roles by deciding

the learning materials, setting personal goals and developing systematic ways with which they will achieve the goals.

In our study, we have found that not all of the participants can be cataegorized into autonomous learners. A small number of participants from the three countries attributed that their learning was not for the sole purpose of learning. For example, 46% of Indonesian participants, 57% of Vietnamese participants and 28% of Thai participants reported that their learning was conducted due to the fulfilment of the required task from their institution. A portion of these number also admitted that they could not assess themselves. This implies that they do not qualify as autonomous learners. This association also resulted from the fact that the volume of exercises and tasks given by the institution pushed them to prepare well, but they forget to assess the way they want to avoid the poor or bad results.

In relation to this metacognitive strategy, this study stands with Anderson's (2008) argument that that it would take careful, encompassing and evolutionary work to understand a learning behaviour and to have a satisfactory response from different perspectives. It is therefore difficult to understand it because learners do not always use planning, control or evaluation in such a linear way. The activities and planned behaviours are probably carried out with different intensities and modifications. Also, many learners put as much effort into learning more effectively as it would take. Yet there are some learners who believe that it is better to give the planning and organization of their learning to the teacher or institution that offers them a well-planned program from the beginning to the end of the process of learning. It is considered a good way to achieve the learning goal. In contrast, however, this situation ignores the learner's autonomy in terms of creativity, because learners expect precisely what to do and how they do it.

One final note from our study is then drawn into an attitude where it is possible for both teachers as facilitators and their students to develop a mutual relation to facilitate learning autonomy through the implementation of metacognitive strategies. By presuming that not all learners are autonomous, teachers can determine the teaching facilitations to cater for both types of learners. Guidance, to some extent, will be necessary in this process. To promote learners to be a good member of a community of practice in the classroom with autonomous learning ability, teachers may ask students to discuss the learning goals in order that the students can set the pace for their learning process. In the process, learning autonomy can be reflected in the ways students use dictionary for difficult words, access the internet for relevant information and/or images to help with word meanings. To promote students to be independent autonomous learners, teachers can give a choice of homework tasks to suit the students learning process, i.e. ones that would be most beneficial to their learning needs and goals.

CONCLUSION

This research concerns the identification and description of the metacognitive learning strategies used by Indonesian, Vietnamese and Thai in three universities where French was taught as Foreign Language (FFL). The study has focused on exploring the metacognitive strategies and how they can be associated with the learning autonomy of the participants. Most of the participants share similar grounds in that they plan their learning. This is an important point to use as a way to draw implications in the participants' learning autonomy.

Following a study by Lengkanawati (2017), this study agrees to the standing that some learning outcomes are only reachable by autonomous learners. Hence, a change is needed in the teaching-learning process paradigms from just transferring knowledge by the teacher to the learners finding needed information by themselves. In many different contexts where students may employ different learning strategies, including metacognitive strategies, learning activities should be created in such a way to promote learners' autonomy to optimize their learning achievements. This also entails teachers' ability to provide learning experiences appt to students' need and interests.

Metacognitive learning strategy is one of the important aspects of language learning. This is a fact where learners become aware whether they are good learners or weak learners. As in other areas of language learning, learners must handle the task in an appropriate manner. This implies readiness, organization, learning management, motivation, a willingness to self-assess, even at the risk of embarrassing failure. By looking for possibilities of exposure to the target language, and by realizing that learning strategy is a skill that relates to all other aspects of learning language, learners will be better prepared for different changes in modern way of learning. By these means, learners will strive to achieve their various goals of learning, and to achieve their desired level of language proficiency. This study is limited in terms of the number of strategies being employed by the participants. Subsequent study in this area may need to be expanded into actual observation of classroom learning experiences. In this way, there will be a clear association between a wider range of the selection of learning strategies that would bring impact on learner's autonomy.

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