

Exploring Language Learning From Social Interactionism Theory

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Abstract

Learning strategies are approaches learners use to acquire information and knowledge. A good learning strategy produces positive learning outcomes. This is a quantitative study that explores the use of learning strategies among undergraduates. It used a 5-point Likert survey rooted in Wenden and Rubin (1987). The survey has 4 sections with a total of 44 items on cognitive components, metacognitive strategies, and resource management. The survey was conducted online with 160 respondents from a Malaysian public university. The results revealed that students moderately used learning strategies. The study also found strong positive relationships between language and thinking, and thinking with meaning. The findings of this study bear interesting implications in the teaching and learning of language in terms of strategy use.

Keywords: Social Interactionism Theory, Learning Strategies, Language Learning

Introduction

Background of Study

Learning a language is an active process that starts at birth and continues throughout life. Students pick languages to express their ideas, emotions, and experiences, build relationships with friends and relatives, and try to make sense and order of their world. Every learning strategy requires a way or a plan to be adapted in order to fulfil the main purpose of learning. Among the important things in the learning process are what to use for learning and how to use it (Hardan, 2013). Learning strategies are steps taken by learners to enhance their learning. (Shi, 2017). An active application of language learning strategies helps learners control their learning by strengthening language skills and boosting confidence and motivation in the learning process. Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (p. 8). According to O’Malley and Chamot (1987), there are three major categories of learning strategies. They are metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective strategies.

Vygotsky (1896–1934) has earlier developed the social-interactionist viewpoint by formulating the social-interactionist theory of language development. This theory, embedded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasises that language is learned through meaningful communication, where learners exchange meaning and receive feedback. (Sajid, 2024) According to this theory, speakers' interactions with listeners create a social phenomenon out of language. This view holds that the child's motivation to interact with others and engage in social events drives language development. Vygotsky (1984) notes three fundamental principles of social interactionism (SIT). The principles are (a) meaning; (b) language; and (c) thinking. This study aims to look at how learners perceive language, thinking, and meaning and how these components are interrelated.

Statement of Problem

Every learning process requires a manner or a strategy to be adapted to achieve the primary purpose of learning. Human beings are involved with many strategies while learning a language. Some of these strategies give the ultimate benefit, yet others are not effective. Language learning strategies research began in the 1970s with the seminal work of Rubin (1975), who suggested that a model of "the good language learner" could be constructed by looking at unique strategies used by successful L2 students. In 1987, Rubin defined language learning strategies as behaviours, steps, or techniques language learners apply to facilitate language learning. Moreover, according to Wenden (1987a), language learning strategies can be defined from the aspect of language learning behaviours, such as learning and regulating the meaning of a second or foreign language, cognitive theory, such as learners' strategic knowledge of language learning, and the practical view, such as learners' motivation, attitude, etc.

Despite various definitions and classifications of language learning strategies, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the role of specific social interactions as a key factor in the development and learning processes. According to Vygotsky, the social function and goal of communication are essential to consider in the collective study of thought and language. He also emphasized the central role of language in cognitive development. Vygotsky maintained that language is not just a communication tool but also a fundamental mechanism for thought. Children acquire the cultural tools necessary for thinking and problem-solving through interaction with others. As children internalise language, they begin to use it to control their thoughts and actions, known as inner speech. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1987), there are three major categories of learning strategies. They are metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective strategies.

This study combines Vygotsky's (1984) social interactionism theory and Wenden and Rubin's (1987) learning strategies. According to Vygotsky (1984), social interactions within specific learning environments (e.g., classrooms, peer groups, or digital platforms) influence the application of language learning strategies and the development of language skills. This study is done to investigate how linguistic, cognitive, and social factors interact during language acquisition in social settings.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to explore the perceptions of learners on their use of learning strategies.

Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions:

- How do learners perceive language as a learning strategy?
- How do learners perceive thinking as a learning strategy?
- How do learners perceive meaning as a learning strategy?
- Is there a relationship between all strategies in learning?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Social Interactionism Theory in Learning

Language acquisition research primarily focuses on three key approaches: Jean Piaget's (1926) developmental cognitive theory (Muss, 1967), the information processing model (competition model) by Brian MacWhinney and Elizabeth Bates (MacWhinney & Bates, 1994), and Lev Vygotsky's social interactionist approach (socio-cultural theory) (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Social Interactionist Theory (SIT) explains language development by highlighting the importance of social interactions between a developing child and adults with linguistic expertise (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) asserts that children's cognitive development is shaped, supported, and enriched through interactions with more experienced and capable individuals, such as parents, teachers, or older siblings. These skilled individuals are capable of independent, self-regulated functioning. In addition, according to Vygotsky (1978), all core cognitive activities emerge within the framework of social history and are shaped by socio-historical development. In other words, "cognitive skills and thinking patterns are shaped by the activities and practices of the social institutions within the culture where an individual is growing." This concept forms the foundation of Vygotsky's "social constructivist" or "sociocultural" approach to language acquisition (Geerson, 2006).

However, Sociocultural theory faces two main challenges: many teachers are unaware of it, and those familiar with it struggle to effectively disseminate it, reflecting the persistent gap between theorists and practitioners (Cook & Seidlhofer, 1995). Therefore, to address these weaknesses, more relatively small-scale studies should be conducted to identify the connection between language acquisition and learners' use of learning strategies.

Learning Strategies

The term "learning strategies" holds various meanings and has been defined in numerous ways by researchers. Ridney (1978) offered an early definition, describing language learning as the deliberate steps or actions taken by learners to improve the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and application of new information. Oxford and Crookall (1989) shared a similar perspective with Ridney (1978) regarding language learning strategies, asserting that these strategies are used to improve and facilitate language acquisition. On the other hand, Brown (1980) offered a straightforward definition of learning strategies, describing them as processes that can directly facilitate learning.

Wenden (1987a) approached the concept from three perspectives: learning and managing meaning, cognitive theory (involving learners' strategic knowledge), and affective factors such as motivation and attitude, all of which are believed to contribute to effective language learning. Rubin (1987) defined language-learning strategies as behaviours, steps, or techniques employed by learners to facilitate their language-learning process.

In conclusion, language learning strategies help learners acquire language and process information through receiving, storing, and recalling.

Past Studies

Past Studies on Learning Strategies

In recent research on second language learning, various studies have examined the impact of language learning strategies (LLS) and learning approaches on student outcomes. Habók and Magyar (2020) explored how self-efficacy, instrumental motivation, effort and perseverance, and preferences for cooperative or competitive learning support second language learning. They conducted a study on 1600 students in Hungary with an age of 10–14 years old. The instrument used were two questionnaires adapted from Oxford Strategies Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and the Student Characteristics as Learners questionnaire. The study confirmed their hypothesis that strategy use significantly influences several learning approaches in the sample. They also found that language learning strategy use has a strong effect on students' learning approaches.

Similarly, Taheri et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between language learning strategies and second language achievement using a quantitative survey design. Involving 300 second language learners, the study revealed a statistically significant correlation between the use of cognitive, social, and compensation strategies and higher levels of language proficiency. This suggests that employing a diverse range of strategies can enhance language learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of teaching learners to adopt various strategies to improve their proficiency.

Furthermore, Chanderan and Hashim (2022) explored the language learning strategies used by English as a Second Language (ESL) students at a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. Their study, which involved 200 freshmen from five different faculties, used a questionnaire adapted from Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to collect data. The findings suggest that students tend to use their preferred strategies to improve their language skills, indicating that language educators should design programs that align with students' preferred LLS to better support their English language development.

By drawing on these studies, it becomes evident that integrating principles of effective learning strategies can create a comprehensive approach to language learning, ultimately supporting learners in achieving their linguistic goals.

Conceptual Framework

Language is an important part of interaction. Learners use language to make sense of the strategies in the process. Learners use strategies to use learning materials to facilitate their learning (Rahmat, 2018). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study combines Vygotsky's (1984) social interactionism theory and Wenden and Rubin's (1987) learning strategies to explore learners' learning processes. Vygotsky (1984) reports that there are three core principles of social interactionism (SIT). The principles are (a) meaning, (b) language, and (c) thinking. These three principles are scaffolded onto learning strategies by Wenden and Rubin (1987) of resource management, cognitive components, and metacognitive self-regulation to reveal the framework in figure 1. Firstly, language provides meaning by providing means for interaction. In the context of this study, this is conveyed through cognitive components such as (i) rehearsal, (ii) organization, (iii) elaboration, and (iv)

critical thinking. Next, learners use thinking as a strategy by using metacognitive self-regulation. Finally, learners create meaning through resource management such as (i) environment management, (ii) effort management, and (iii) help-seeking.

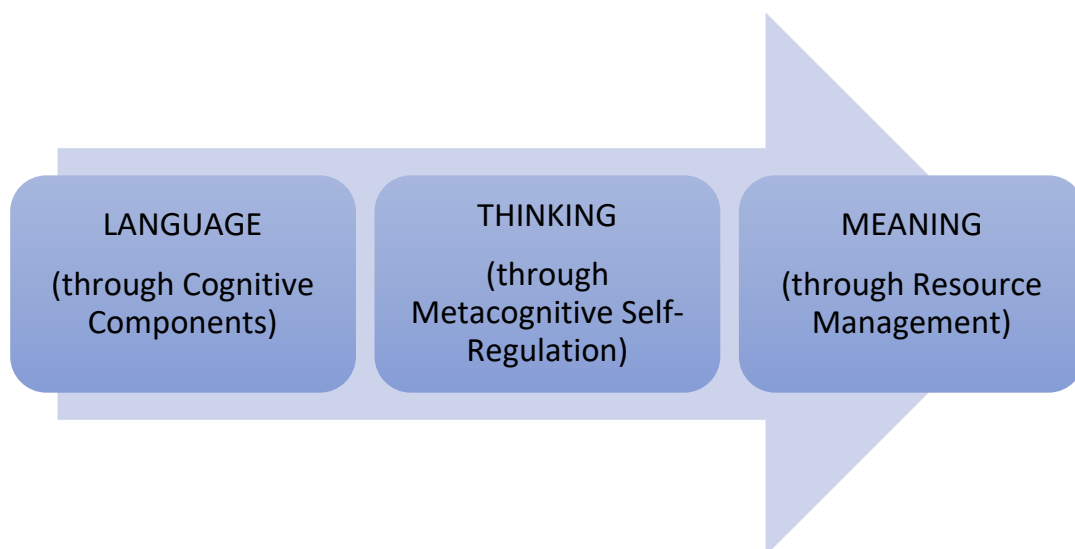


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study
Exploring Language Learning from Social Interactionism Theory

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to explore the perception of learners on their use of learning strategies among undergraduates. A purposive sample of 160 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5-Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Wenden and Rubin (1987) to reveal the variables in Table 1 below. The survey has 4 sections. Section A has items on the demographic profile. Section B has 19 items of cognitive components. Section C has 11 items on metacognitive strategies. Section D has 11 items on resource management.

Table 1
Distribution of Items in the Survey

SECT	COMPONENTS SIT by Vygotsky (1984)	STRATEGY (KEYWORD)		SUB-STRATEGY	ITEM	TOT ITEM	CRONBACH ALPHA
B	LANGUAGE	COGNITIVE COMPONENTS	(a)	Rehearsal	4	19	.930
			(b)	Organization	4		
			(c)	Elaboration	6		
			(d)	Critical Thinking	5		
C	THINKING	METACOGNITIVE SELF-REGULATION				11	.883
D	MEANING	RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	(a)	Environment Management	5	11	.833
			(b)	Effort Management	4		
			(c)	Help-Seeking	2		
			)				
						41	.953

Table 1 also shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .930 for Language, .883 for Thinking, and .833 for Meaning. The overall reliability for all 41 items is .953; thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Table 2

Percentage for Q1-Gender

NO	ITEM	PERCENTAGE
1	Male	26%
2	Female	74%

Table 2 shows the percentage for gender. 74% of the respondents are female, and 26% are male.

Table 3

Percentage for Q2- Discipline

NO	ITEM	PERCENTAGE
1	Science and Technology	70%
2	Social Sciences	30%

As shown in Table 3, the majority of the respondents (70%) are from the Science and Technology. Only 30% of the respondents are from the Social Science field.

Table 4

Percentage for Q3-Level of Japanese Language

NO	LEVEL	PERCENTAGE
1	1	36%
2	2	32%
3	3	34%

Table 4 shows the distribution of Japanese language levels the respondents are taking. 36% of the respondents are taking Japanese level 1, 32% level 2, and 34% level 3.

Findings for Language

This section presents data to answer research question 1: How do learners perceive language as a learning strategy? In the context of this study, this is measured by cognitive components such as (i) rehearsal, (ii) organisation, (iii) elaboration and (iv) critical thinking.

Table 5

Mean for (i) Rehearsal (4 items)

Item	Mean	SD
LSCCRQ1 When I study for the classes, I practice saying the material to myself over and over.	3.7	.77842
LSCCRQ 2 When studying for the courses, I read my class notes and the course readings over and over again.	3.6	.76633
LSCCRQ 3 I memorize key words to remind me of important concepts in this class.	3.7	.79216
LSCCRQ 4 I make lists of important items for the courses and memorize the lists.	3.6	.89931

Table 5 above shows the mean score for the cognitive components of rehearsal. The items “When I study for the classes, I practice saying the material to myself over and over again” and “I memorize key words to remind me of important concepts in this class” recorded a mean score of 3.7. A lower mean score of 3.6 was recorded for the items “When studying for the courses, I read my class notes and the course readings over and over again” and “I make lists of important items for the courses and memorize the lists.”

Table 6

Mean for (ii) Organization (4 items)

Item	Mean	SD
LSCCOQ1 When I study the readings for the courses in the program, I outline the material to help me organize my thoughts.	3.4	.86364
LSCCOQ 2 When I study for the courses, I go through the readings and my class notes and try to find the most important ideas.	3.7	.87395
LSCCOQ 3 I make simple charts, diagrams, or tables to help me organize course materials in this program.	3	.99904
LSCCOQ 4 When I study for the courses, I go over my class notes and outline important concepts.	3.5	.91725

Table 6 presents the mean score for the cognitive components of organization. The highest mean score is 3.7, which shows that the learners go through the readings and class notes and try to find the most important ideas. Learners also go over class notes and make an outline of important concepts (3.5) and outline the material to help organize the learner's thoughts (3.4). Meanwhile, for the lowest mean score (3.0), learners make simple charts, diagrams, or tables to help organize course materials in the program. There is a big difference between items of the highest and lowest mean scores (0.7 mean score difference). It shows that learners prefer to go through the readings and class notes instead of making simple charts, diagrams, or tables to help organize course materials.

Table 7

Mean for (iii) Elaboration (6 items)

Item	Mean	SD
LSCCEQ1 When I study for the courses in this program, I pull together information from different sources, such as lectures, readings, and discussions.	3.5	.83091
LSCCEQ 2 I try to relate ideas in one subject to those in other courses whenever possible	3.4	.89458
LSCCEQ 3 When reading for the courses, I try to relate the material to what I already know.	3.7	.80006
LSCCEQ 4 When I study for the courses in this program, I write brief summaries of the main ideas from the readings and my class notes.	3.2	.93491
LSCCEQ 5 I try to understand the material in the classes by making connections between the readings and the concepts from the lectures.	3.6	.79540
LSCCEQ 6 I try to apply ideas from course readings in other class activities, such as lectures and discussions.	3.5	.84638

Table 7 above shows the mean score for elaboration. The highest mean score (3.7) is for "When reading for the courses, I try to relate the material to what I already know," followed by "I try to understand the material in the classes by making connections between the readings and the concepts from the lectures" with a mean score of (3.6). The mean score for "When I study for the courses in this program, I pull together information from different sources, such as lectures, readings, and discussions" and "I try to apply ideas from course readings in other class activities, such as lecture and discussion" are slightly lower (3.5). The lowest mean score (3.2) is "When I study for the courses in this program, I write summaries of the main ideas from the readings and my class notes."

Table 8

Mean for (iv) Critical Thinking (5 items)

Item	Mean	SD
LSCCCTQ1 I often find myself questioning things I hear or read in the courses to decide if I find them convincing.	3.6	.83468
LSCCCTQ 2 When a theory, interpretation, or conclusion is presented in classes or the readings, I try to decide if there is good supporting evidence.	3.3	.76797
LSCCCTQ 3 I treat the course materials as a starting point and try to develop my own ideas about it.	3.5	.75107
LSCCCTQ 4 I try to play around with ideas of my own related to what I am learning in the courses.	3.3	.75901
LSCCCTQ 5 Whenever I read or hear an assertion or conclusion in the classes, I think about possible alternatives.	3.6	.77338

Figure 8 illustrates the mean scores for the cognitive component of critical thinking. The two highest mean scores (3.6) are for "I try to play around with ideas of my own related to what I am learning in the courses" and "Whenever I read or hear an assertion or conclusion in the classes, I think about possible alternatives" (3.6). Conversely, the two lowest mean scores are for "When a theory, interpretation, or conclusion is presented in classes or the readings, I try to decide if there is good supporting evidence" (3.3) and "I try to play around with ideas of my own related to what I am learning in the courses".

The highest mean scores suggest that students are actively exploring their ideas and considering alternative viewpoints in response to the course material. However, the lower mean scores indicate a relatively weaker focus on evaluating the supporting evidence for theories, interpretations, or conclusions presented in class, highlighting an area for potential improvement in fostering critical analysis and evidence-based thinking.

Findings for Thinking

This section presents data to answer research question 2: How do learners perceive thinking as a learning strategy? In the context of this study, this is measured by metacognitive self-regulation.

Table 9

Mean for Metacognitive Self-Regulation

Item	Mean	SD
MSSRQ1 During class time, I often miss important points because I am thinking of other things.	2.9	.94484
MSSRQ 2 When reading for the courses, I make up questions to help focus my reading.	3.2	.82585
MSSRQ 3 When I become confused about something I am reading for the classes, I go back and try to figure it out.	3.7	.81563
MSSRQ 4 If course readings are difficult to understand, I change the way I read the material.	3.5	.89645
MSSRQ 5 Before I study new course material thoroughly, I often skim it to see how it is organized	2.5	.83814
MSSRQ 6 I ask myself questions to make sure I understand the material I have been studying in this program.	3.5	.83155
I try to change the way I study in order to fit any course requirements and the instructors' teaching style.	3.4	.79849
MSSRQ8I try to think through a topic and decide what I am supposed to learn from it, rather than just reading it over when studying for the courses in this program.	3.4	.79797
MSSRQ 9 When studying for the courses in this program, I try to determine which concepts I do not understand well.	3.5	.76025
MSSRQ 10 When I study for the courses, I set goals for myself to direct my activities in each study period.	3.5	.84665
MSSRQ 11 If I get confused taking notes in classes, I make sure I sort it out afterwards.	3.6	.86691

Table 9 shows the results for Metacognitive Self-Regulation. The highest mean (3.7) is for "When I become confused about something I am reading for the classes, I go back and try to figure it out," followed by "If I get confused taking notes in classes, I make sure I sort it out afterwards," with the mean of 3.6. Four items share a mean of 3.5. They are "If course readings are difficult to understand, I change the way I read the material." "I ask myself questions to make sure I understand the material I have been studying in this program," "When studying for the courses in this program, I try to determine which concepts I do not understand well," and "When I study for the courses, I set goals for myself in order to direct my activities in each study period." Among the lowest means are "During class time, I often miss important points because I am thinking of other things," with a mean of 2.9 and the

lowest mean score “Before I study new course material thoroughly, I often skim it to see how it is organized.”

Findings for Meaning

This section presents data to answer research question 3: How do learners perceive meaning as a learning strategy? In the context of this study, this is measured by resource management such as (i) environment management, (ii) effort management, and (iii) help-seeking.

Table 10

Mean for (i) Environment Management (5 items)

Item	Mean	SD
RMCEMQ1 I usually study in a place where I can concentrate on my coursework.	4	.83138
RMCEMQ 2 I make good use of my study time for the courses in this program.	3.7	.75141
RMCEMQ3 I have a regular place set aside for studying	3.6	.90158
RMCEMQ 4 Make sure that I keep up with the weekly readings and assignments for the courses.	3.6	.80866
RMCEMQ 5 I attend the classes regularly in this program.	4.3	.79454

As shown in Table 10 above, the highest mean score is 4.3 for the item “I attend the classes regularly in this program.” Followed by a mean score of 4.0 for “I usually study in a place where I can concentrate on my coursework.” The item “I make good use of study time for the course in this program” has achieved a mean score of 3.7. To have a regular place set aside for studying and make sure to keep up with the weekly readings or assignments for the courses has achieved a mean score of 3.6.

Table 11

Mean for (ii) Effort Management (4 items)

Item	Mean	SD
RMCEMQ1 I have a regular place set aside for studying	3.6	.95362
RMCEMQ 2 I work hard to do well in the classes in this program, even if I do not like what we are doing.	3.7	.79265
RMCEMQ 3 When coursework is difficult, I either give up or only study the easy parts.	2.8	1.05730
RMCEMQ 4 Even when the course materials are dull and uninteresting, I manage to keep working until I finish.	3.7	.79464

As shown in Table 11, the items “I work hard to do well for the program even if I don’t like what we are doing” and “Even when course materials are dull and uninteresting, I manage to keep working until I finish” achieved the highest mean score of 3.7. The second highest mean score is 3.6, where learners do have a regular place set aside for studying. The least mean score achieved (2.8) is for the item “When coursework is difficult, I either give up or only study the easy parts.”

Table 12

Mean for (iii) Help-Seeking (2 items)

Item	Mean	SD
RMCHSQ 1 When I cannot understand the material in a course, I ask another student in the class for help.	4	.79216
RMCHSQ 2 I try to identify students in the classes whom I can ask for help if necessary.	3.9	.80251

The findings, in Table 12, indicate that two items from help-seeking in resource management have achieved high mean scores of 4.0 and 3.9, respectively. “When I cannot understand the material in a course, I ask another student in the class for help” recorded a mean score of 4, and “I try to identify students in the classes whom I can ask for help if necessary” recorded a mean score of 3.9.

Findings for the Relationship between all Strategies in Learning

This section presents data to answer research question 4- Is there a relationship between all strategies in learning?

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between all strategies in learning, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in tables 13 and 14 below.

Table 13

*Correlation between Language and Thinking***Correlations**

		LANGUAGE	THINKING
LANGUAGE	Pearson Correlation	1	.729**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	160	160
THINKING	Pearson Correlation	.729**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	160	160

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 13 shows there is an association between language and thinking. Correlation analysis shows that there is a highly significant association between language and thinking ($r=.729^{**}$) and ($p=.000$). According to Jackson (2015), the coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between language and thinking.

Table 14

*Correlation between Thinking and Meaning***Correlations**

		THINKING	MEANING
THINKING	Pearson Correlation	1	.689 ^{**}
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	160	160
MEANING	Pearson Correlation	.689 ^{**}	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	160	160

^{**}. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 14 shows there is an association between thinking and meaning. Correlation analysis shows that there is a highly significant association between thinking and meaning ($r=.689^{**}$) and ($p=.000$). According to Jackson (2015), the coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between thinking and meaning.

Conclusion*Summary of Findings and Discussions*

Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social interaction in language learning. He believed that social interaction greatly influences cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive skills and thinking patterns are shaped by the activities and practices of the social institutions within the culture where an individual is growing. Vygotsky introduced three core principles of social interactionism; they are meaning, language, and thinking. He summarized that language is central to cognitive development, influencing thinking and helping to form meaning. This study is done to look at the students' perceptions of language, meaning, and thinking as a learning strategy. The findings showed that the students employed language learning strategies moderately. Among the three components, the students perceive meaning as the most important learning strategy. This was shown in the mean for environment and help-seeking. Conversely, results for language and reasoning are relatively lower, particularly for thinking. The research question of whether there is a relationship between all learning strategies shows that there is an association between language and thinking, and thinking and meaning. The results indicate a strong positive relationship between language and thinking, and thinking and meaning.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Language learning strategies play a crucial role in the learning process. It is crucial to be aware of how to learn a language, not only of what to study. Knowledge of the traits of a successful language learner will enable students to improve their effectiveness in language learning. For future studies, it is important to focus on the strategies used by successful

learners. We need to find out what kind of strategies successful learners use to yield good results in language learning.

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