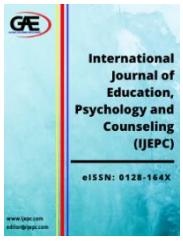
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INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES IN FACILITATING LEARNER AUTONOMY AMONG ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract:

In today's English language learning, promoting learner autonomy is essential. Metacognitive strategies such as planning, evaluating and monitoring are key indicators to help learners foster learner autonomy. However, more evidence-based studies are needed to comprehend how learners operate in specific roles, relationships and certain learning settings. This quantitative study is aimed to investigate the role of metacognitive strategies in facilitating language learning and learner autonomy among ESL learners in Malaysia. A purposive sample of 261 ESL students from a public university responded to an adapted questionnaire on metacognitive strategies and autonomy. The findings indicate that metacognitive strategies play a crucial role in fostering learner autonomy throughout their learning process, with evaluation and monitoring being the most practised components. Overall, this study confirms that metacognitive strategies are significantly associated with key learning skills, supporting the central role of learner autonomy. Thus, explicit metacognitive instruction is highly encouraged in ESL settings to further support learner autonomy.

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Introduction

Background of Study

The global education context is rapidly evolving, shaped by international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2030 agenda in which inculcating equitable quality education and lifelong learning. In line with this direction, education is gradually moving away from teacher-led instruction towards learner-centred contexts where students are encouraged to "learn how to learn" and actively take ownership of their own learning experiences (Henriques & Brilha, 2017). This can also be seen where educators are responsible for their lesson time and also to incorporate various reflective activities for learners to help them to be able to evaluate their progress, sustain their motivation and develop important self-regulation skills (Suharto, Damayanti & Lengkanawati, 2025). This shift is particularly relevant in language learning since it requires communicative competencies including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic awareness, and strategic ability.

In this context, developing learner autonomy has become a central objective. Introduced into language education by Holec (1981), autonomy is defined as learners' ability to take responsibility for their learning by setting goals, choosing appropriate resources and strategies, monitoring their progress, and evaluating learning outcomes independently. Nevertheless, autonomy does not happen naturally, but learners need specific skills and support. Metacognitive strategies therefore play a vital role. Based on Flavell's (1979) framework, these strategies involve higher-level regulatory processes such as planning learning tasks, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. Through these processes, learners strengthen their self-awareness and self-regulation, enabling them to respond more effectively to the demands of language acquisition.

Statement of Problem

In Malaysian tertiary education, the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 (MEB-HE) emphasises the development of holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates who practise lifelong learning (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). For students in English as a Second Language (ESL) programmes, this includes achieving strong communicative competence and learner autonomy, which are necessary for academic success and future employability in a globalised economy. However, an ongoing challenge in the TESL domain at the university level is that many ESL learners in Malaysian public universities still

rely heavily on teacher-led learning and struggle to become independent, self-regulated learners. While ESL learners may use different language learning strategies, many lack metacognitive regulation to select, monitor, and evaluate effectively in varied contexts (Awang, Zakaria & Suhaimin, 2025). This consequently leads to difficulties with tasks requiring continuous self-directed effort such as academic writing, extensive reading, and long-term language project management.

Although international research supports the importance of metacognitive strategies, focused studies examining their specific role and measurable relationship with learner autonomy among Malaysian ESL undergraduates remain limited. Local research often investigates learning strategies or autonomy separately, or concentrates on secondary school contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how metacognitive awareness and control support autonomy in higher education. Consequently, educators may lack sufficient evidence to design targeted interventions that explicitly connect metacognitive strategy instruction with autonomous learning behaviours, as envisioned by global agendas such as ESD 2030 and national policies such as the MEB-HE. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by investigating the role of metacognitive strategies in facilitating learner autonomy among ESL learners in a Malaysian public university, providing localised insights to inform pedagogical practice and curriculum development.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to investigate the role of metacognitive strategies in facilitating language learning and learner autonomy among ESL learners.

RO1: To identify the metacognitive strategies used by ESL learners to facilitate language learning.
RO2: To identify ESL learners' perception regarding the use of metacognitive strategies in language learning in order to facilitate learner autonomy.
RO3: To determine if there is a relationship between metacognitive strategies in language learning and learner autonomy.

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

RQ1: What are the metacognitive strategies used by ESL learners to facilitate language learning?
RQ2: How do ESL learners perceive the use of metacognitive strategies in language learning to facilitate learner autonomy?
RQ3: Is there a relationship between metacognitive strategies in language learning and learner autonomy?

Literature Review

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies play a pivotal role in language learning by enabling learners to consciously manage their learning process through three interrelated phases, namely planning, monitoring and evaluating. Metacognitive strategies of planning prepare learners' potential in learning through independent exploration including setting goals and determining appropriate

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learning strategies (Amin et al., 2020). As for monitoring, this phase keeps students focused and engaged as well as helps them to comprehend what they are learning (Andriani & Mbato, 2021). In the evaluation phase, learners control and evaluate their success to confirm and reflect on the new knowledge they have obtained (Amin et al., 2020).

Metacognitive strategies have been recognized as effective in the learning process by many scholars. One particular study by Rivas, Saiz and Ossa (2022) on 89 psychology students in Spain has proven that there were improvements in critical thinking scores when metacognitive strategies were present. Specifically in the fields of English Language Studies (ELS), a study conducted by Komalah, Adelina and Lim (2024) on three proficient 16-year-old ESL students from a Malaysian secondary school revealed that the participants employed metacognitive strategies to enhance the quality of their speeches. The metacognitive strategies used include organisational planning, selective attention, and self-monitoring. Vellanki, Khan and Mond (2024) also proposed for metacognitive strategies to be integrated into the language curriculum, teacher training and learning resources. This relates to the significant impact these strategies have on one's learning process.

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy has emerged as a central theme in language education, originally coined by Holec (1981) as students' ability to take charge of their learning processes (as cited in Yildiz & Yucedal, 2020). However, it is important to note that learner autonomy is difficult to achieve without the existence of other factors such as motivation, the ability for self-directed learning and teacher aid (Yildiz & Yucedal, 2020).

In a study by Marantika (2021) which analyzes the relationship between metacognitive ability and learning autonomy, it was found that students who are better at managing their awareness in learning will gain better insight into their thoughts and learning processes, enabling them to better manage the selection and application of learning strategies, organize their approach to completing tasks, and evaluate their own progress. Findings from Vellanki, Khan and Mond (2024) highlighted the importance of metacognitive strategy instruction in student's learning process as it promotes autonomous learning behaviour including planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning.

Learner autonomy, a critical component in language learning, has been the focus of numerous studies, including Ismail, Yunus and Zahidi's (2020) review on nine studies in various Asian contexts on teachers' beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy. The comprehensive review is found to have positive dispositions in regard to learner autonomy. However, it is also found that learner-related limitations such as lack of readiness, motivation and understanding can hinder learner autonomy.

Conceptual Framework

Learners who effectively use metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluating) may be encouraged for more self-awareness and reflection, enabling them to take ownership of their learning and obtain learner autonomy. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study is rooted from Flavell's (1979) model of metacognitive monitoring and the concept of learner autonomy by Holec (1981).

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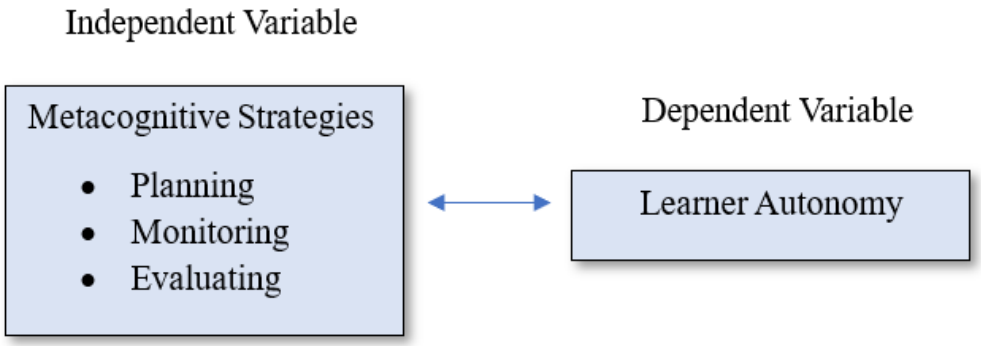


Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework: Metacognitive Strategies and Learner Autonomy

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to investigate the role of metacognitive strategies in facilitating language learning and learner autonomy among ESL learners. A purposive sample of 261 participants responded to the survey. The data collection involves two questionnaires; Metacognitive Strategies Questionnaire (MSQ) and Learners' Autonomy Questionnaire. The first section (Section A) has items on demographic profile. The MSQ that has been validated by Cai et al. (2019) was used to identify the metacognitive strategies used by ESL learners. MSQ has 3 sections which are Section B, C and D that covers planning, evaluating and monitoring respectively. Each section consists of five items on a six-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree). ESL learners' perceptions of using metacognitive strategies in language learning to facilitate learner autonomy were measured using the Learners' Autonomy Questionnaire which was adapted from Autonomy in Reading Comprehension (RC) Questionnaire from Shirzad and Ebadi (2020). The questionnaire consists of 25 items on a six-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree).

Table 1 - Distribution of Items in the Survey

STRATEGY	SECTION	SUB-STRATEGY	No of items	Cronbach Alpha
Metacognitive Strategy Questionnaire (MSQ)	B	Planning	5	0.722
	C	Evaluating	5	0.751
	D	Monitoring	5	0.759
Learners' Autonomy Questionnaire			25	0.898
			40	0.930

Table 1 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.722 for MSQ section B, 0.751 for MSQ section C, 0.759 for MSQ section D and 0.898 for Learners' Autonomy Questionnaire. Overall, the reliability of the survey is 0.930. Thus, this reveals a good reliability of the instrument chosen. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

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Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Table 2 - Percentage for Demographic Profile

Q1	Gender	Male	Female
		19.5%	80.5%

As indicated in table 2, female respondents represented 80.5% (210 students) and the male respondents represented 19.5% (51 students).

Findings for Metacognitive Strategies Used in Facilitating Language Learning Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 1- What are the metacognitive strategies used by ESL learners to facilitate language learning?

Table 3 - Mean for Planning in Metacognitive Strategies

NO	ITEMS	MEAN
1	MSQP1 - At the beginning of each school term, I set an English language learning plan for myself.	3.92
2	MSQP2 - If it will take longer to finish an English learning task, I will set a working schedule in advance.	4.44
3	MSQP3 - Before important English language examinations, I arrange my revision according to my planned schedule.	4.80
4	MSQP4 - I schedule the time to study English according to my plan.	4.54
5	MSQP5 - I like to get a list of things I need to do, and then tackle them one by one.	4.99

Table 3 above presents the mean score for the five items under the "Planning" category which is to identify the respondents Planning Stage in Metacognitive Strategies. The highest mean score is MSQPS5, where the respondents prefer to have a to-do list and complete one by one during their planning stage. This is closely followed by MSQP3, in which respondents arrange their revision according to a planned schedule before important English language examinations with a mean score of 4.80. MSQP4 and MSQP2 where respondents have to schedule their time according to their plan to study English and set working schedule in advance if they require longer time to finish an English task both scored 4.54 and 4.44 respectively. Setting an English learning plan at the beginning of school term (MSQP1) has the lowest mean score of 3.92 when it comes to the Planning Stage.

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Table 4 - Mean for Evaluating in Metacognitive Strategies

NO	ITEMS	MEAN
1	MSQE1 - I modify the way I complete my English assignments according to the different requirements.	4.98
2	MSQE2 - After I get back my English test papers, I try to understand the mistakes I have made.	5.48
3	MSQE3 - I focus on my common mistakes and repeatedly practice the items until I get them right.	5.07
4	MSQE4 - When I find that I decline in my English achievement, I change my language learning methods.	4.58
5	MSQE5 - I modify my English language learning methods to meet the needs of the College English course.	4.87

Table 4 illustrates the mean scores for the five items used to identify the respondents' perceptions towards their "Evaluation Method in Metacognitive Strategies". Most respondents indicated that they try to understand the mistakes committed after receiving their English test papers back (MSQE2) with a score of 5.48. This is followed by (MSQE3) where they focus on their common mistakes and consistently practice those items until getting it right with a mean value of 5.07. MSQE1, where respondents change the way they complete their English assignments according to the different requirements, has a mean score of 4.98. This is closely followed by MSQE5 with 4.87 indicating that they change their English language learning methods to meet the needs of the College English course and the lowest mean score is 4.58 in which respondents change their language learning methods when they find that their English achievement declines (MSQE4).

Table 5 - Mean for Monitoring in Metacognitive Strategies

NO	ITEMS	MEAN
1	MSQM1 - I reflect upon my English language learning strategies to see if they are effective.	4.73
2	MSQM2 - I compare myself with others to observe if my language learning strategies are effective.	5.03
3	MSQM3 - I keep records of my English language learning performance in order to monitor how much progress I have made.	4.61
4	MSQM4 - When I encounter difficulties in English language learning, I reflect on possible mistakes that I might have made.	5.09
5	MSQM5 - I check if I have corrected the mistakes in English language learning that I have made previously.	5.16

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Table 5 portrays the mean score for “Monitoring in Metacognitive Strategies". The highest mean is 5.16 where respondents check if they have corrected the mistakes in English language learning that they have made previously (MSQM5). Closely followed by 5.09 and 5.03 indicating that when respondents encounter difficulties in English language learning, they reflect on possible mistakes that they might have made (MSQM4) and they compare themselves to others to observe if their language learning strategies are effective (MSQM2). Next is MSQM1 where respondents reflect upon their English language learning strategies to see if they are effective with a score of 4.73. The lowest mean is 4.61 for MSQM3 representing respondents that keep records of their English language learning performance in order to monitor how much progress they have made.

Findings for ESL Learners Perception on the use of Metacognitive Strategies in Language Learning to facilitate Learner Autonomy

This section displays data to answer research question 2- How do ESL learners perceive the use of metacognitive strategies in language learning to facilitate learner autonomy?

Table 6 - Mean for Learner's Autonomy

NO	ITEMS	MEAN
1	LA1 - I think I can comprehend English well.	4.81
2	LA2 - I think collaboration with my classmates helps to improve my English.	5.39
3	LA3 - In addition to the given assignments by the lecturer, I have a clear plan to revise on my own.	4.64
4	LA4 - Outside of class, I make the most of numerous opportunities to learn English.	4.51
5	LA5 - I like trying new techniques while learning English.	4.69
6	LA6 - It is difficult for me to put newly learned English learning techniques into practice.	3.91
7	LA7 - I can consciously apply effective strategies to enhance my English learning.	4.55
8	LA8 - I can consciously monitor the usage of English learning strategies during practice.	4.59
9	LA9 - I select effective methods to become a better English learner.	4.84
10	LA10 - I am conscious of whether or not my method of learning is practical.	4.67
11	LA11 - If I notice that my method of learning is inappropriate, I quickly find a more practical one.	4.77

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12	LA12 - I am able to find problems in my method of learning.	4.34
13	LA13 - If I find problems in my method of learning, I am able to solve them.	4.37
14	LA14 - In English lessons, I try activities which I can do on my own.	5.02
15	LA15 - During the class, I try to find opportunities to participate in activities such as pair/group discussion, etc.	4.81
16	LA16 - When learning English, I manage achievable goals for myself based on my true proficiency level.	4.95
17	LA17 - It is difficult for me to create a practical learning schedule for myself.	3.84
18	LA18 - I am good at adapting my study plans based on my progress.	4.46
19	LA19 - I keep in line with my predetermined plan while completing a certain English learning task.	4.52
20	LA20 - I utilized available learning resources such as libraries, the internet, dictionaries etc. to boost my English learning.	5.07
21	LA21 - I usually study with other people, e.g., practicing with a language partner, or practicing and reviewing materials with classmates.	4.23
22	LA22 - When I have difficulties answering English questions and practices, I get help from others.	5.27
23	LA23 - When I discover my mistakes in learning English, I understand the underlying reason for making them.	5.08
24	LA24 - I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English learning.	5.07
25	LA25 - I can assess my own English learning progress.	4.57

Table 6 indicates the mean value for Learners's Autonomy. 25 questions were asked under this category. The highest mean is 5.39 for LA2 where respondents think collaboration with their classmates helps to improve their English, while the lowest mean is for LA17 where it is difficult for respondents to create a practical learning schedule for themselves, with a mean score of 3.84. With an average mean score of 4.64, most respondents feel that in addition to the given assignments by the lecturer, they have a clear plan to revise on their own (LA3).

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Findings for Relationship between Metacognitive Strategies in Language Learning and Learner Autonomy

This section exhibits data to answer research question 3- Is there a relationship between metacognitive strategies in language learning and learner autonomy? To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between metacognitive strategies in language learning and learner autonomy, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented in table 7 below.

Table 7 - Correlation between Metacognitive Strategies and Learner Autonomy

Correlations

		METACOGNITIVESTRATEGIES	LEARNERAUTONOMY
METACOGNITIVESTRATEGIES	Pearson Correlation	1	.732**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	261	261
LEARNERAUTONOMY	Pearson Correlation	.732**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	261	261

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

Table 7 shows there is an association between metacognitive strategies and learner autonomy. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between metacognitive strategies and learner autonomy (r=.732**) and (p=.001). According to Jackson (2015), 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 metacognitive strategies and learner autonomy.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussions

The findings suggest that in developing learners' autonomy, metacognitive strategies significantly play a huge role, underpinning both theoretical frameworks and past empirical studies covered in the literature. First, the findings revealed that ESL learners frequently utilise metacognitive strategies in their learning processes, primarily in the aspects of evaluation and monitoring. Students reported that they often analyse their errors upon receiving their English test results and continuously practise problematic items until they improve. This supports the evaluation phase of metacognitive strategies explained by Amin et al. (2020) in which learners review their learning results to enhance understanding and performance in future tasks. Similarly, high mean scores of monitoring behaviours such as reflecting on mistakes and checking whether previously identified errors have been corrected, aligns with Andriani and

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Mbato (2021)'s view that monitoring allows learners to maintain focus and be mindful of their learning progress. Haque (2018) identified that metacognition is a crucial element in learner autonomy as it enables autonomous learners to fully engage in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning. This further corroborates Flavell's (1979) emphasis on the value of self-awareness and self-regulation for effective learning process in his theory of metacognitive monitoring. Nonetheless, compared to monitoring and evaluation, findings indicate that planning techniques were used slightly less frequently. Fewer respondents reported setting long-term English learning goals at the beginning of the semester despite the majority employed organising revision schedules and creating task lists. In that regard, although learners can self-regulate while completing tasks, they may still need assistance in long-term strategic planning. Correspondingly, this supports Amin et al. (2020), who highlighted the essential but underdeveloped role of planning as a part of metacognitive component which requires explicit instructional support.

Second, positive perceptions towards learner autonomy have been shown by ESL learners in the findings. Awareness of learning strengths and weaknesses, active class participation and the use of available learning resources were demonstrated by respondents, reinforcing Holec's (1981) concept of learner autonomy in which learners take charge of their learning through goal setting, strategy selection and self-evaluation. Moreover, learners perceive peer interaction as an important component for learners' learning development in light of the high mean score for collaboration with classmates. These findings echo the arguments of Amin et al. (2020), who suggested that through collaborative learning environments, learner autonomy can also be enhanced, not just by learning in isolation. In spite of these positive perceptions, few challenges were identified. Respondents struggled developing practical learning plans and applying newly learned learning strategies independently. These challenges reflect the learner-related limitations mentioned in previous studies particularly in lack of readiness and insufficient comprehension of autonomous learning processes (Ismail et al., 2020). Thus, even though learners portray awareness of autonomy, they still require guidance and structured support to fully create self-directed learning habits.

Lastly, a strong positive relationship between metacognitive strategies and learner autonomy ($r = .732$, $p = .001$) is revealed in the correlation analysis, suggesting higher levels of autonomy for learners who often implement metacognitive strategies. This result is consistent with Marantika (2021), who discovered that learners with high metacognitive awareness were more likely to handle their learning processes and employ effective strategies autonomously. Furthermore, these findings reinforce the theoretical frameworks of Flavell (1979) and Holec (1981) as well as the theoretical perspective that metacognitive regulation through planning, monitoring and evaluating serves as a key mechanism that allows learners to take greater control of their learning experiences. Integrating explicit metacognitive strategies in ESL classrooms will further strengthen learners' ability to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning, ultimately supporting their autonomy in language learning contexts.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Findings from this research suggest critical insights for ESL educators, curriculum developers and policymakers aiming to transition language classrooms from teacher-dependent environments to learner autonomy environments. It can be seen that Metacognitive Strategies involving planning, monitoring and evaluating one's own learning are linked to learner's autonomy, making learners take full responsibility of their learning process, make decisions

about the learning goals and regulate their process effectively. To foster learner's autonomy, ESL educators must embrace this change by allowing learners to control their planning and monitoring learning experiences. The integration of peer-review sessions and providing feedback allows learners to practice the evaluation process by assessing each other's work that can help facilitate individual self-evaluation. With the integration of metacognitive strategies into ESL teaching and learning environment, educators can instill learner autonomy where learners are capable of managing their own learning beyond classroom context. Future research should include qualitative research methods, such as interviews or focus groups discussions to gain deeper insights into ESL learners' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of metacognitive strategies in fostering learners' autonomy. Future research could also investigate the effectiveness of different metacognitive strategies in enhancing learner autonomy among ESL learners, and also the role of technology-mediated learning environments. By understanding how technology facilitates planning, evaluating and monitoring processes, this may offer valuable insights for language teaching and learning process. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute more to how metacognitive strategies impact learner autonomy and contribute to the development of effective pedagogical strategies for ESL learners.

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