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Self-Regulated Learning Behaviors Among ESL Learners

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Abstract. Self-regulated learning (SRL) is a key determinant of academic success, especially in complex domains such as learning English as a second language (ESL). This paper explores the SRL-related characteristics, typical problems, and optimization strategies among ESL learners. Through a synthesis of recent empirical research and theoretical frameworks, the analysis reveals that effective SRL is manifested in customized strategies for different language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), involving multi-dimensional regulatory processes (goal setting, emotion control and reflective monitoring), and is significantly influenced by cultural and identity factors. However, ESL learners commonly encounter challenges such as vague goals, limited metacognitive monitoring, and language anxiety, which impede their self-regulation abilities. To address these issues, this paper proposes targeted interventions, including guiding goal setting and constructing a phased task system, explicitly instructing the framework of metacognitive strategies, and integrating emotion regulation tools. The conclusion of this paper is that fostering robust SRL behaviors is crucial for empowering ESL learners to become autonomous, proficient, and psychologically resilient language users.

Keywords: Self-Regulated Learning, ESL, Metacognition, Language Learning Strategies, Emotional Regulation

1. Introduction

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is an active process in which learners set goals, monitor progress, adjust cognition and emotions, and reflect on learning outcomes [1]. In the context of acquiring English as a second language (ESL), the reason why SRL is particularly crucial is that language acquisition is complex and long-term. ESL learners not only need to master linguistic rules, but also need to cope with subtle social and cultural differences. Moreover, they usually learn in an environment with limited exposure to the target language, which also increases the difficulty and duration of learning [1]. The ability to self-regulate – to plan, control and evaluate one's own learning – can significantly distinguish successful learners from struggling ones [2]. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of SRL behaviors among ESL learners by analyzing their characteristic features, identifying prevalent problems and proposing evidence-based optimization strategies. The theoretical foundation of the paper is based on seminal SRL models and integrates contemporary research specific to second language acquisition (SLA) [1-3]. Understanding and enhancing SRL in ESL contexts is vital for designing educational interventions that can promote

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learner autonomy, improve academic performance and support psychological well-being, thereby equipping learners with global communication and lifelong learning.

2. Characteristics of self-regulated behaviors in second language learning

2.1. Strategy differences across language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing

Self-regulated learners demonstrate a remarkable ability to select and deploy specific strategies tailored to the demands of different language skills. The differences in these strategies highlight the characteristics of SRL in the ESL context.

For instance, in listening comprehension, metacognitive strategies are of vital importance. Learners must plan how to approach listening tasks (such as predicting the content), monitor their understanding from time to time during the task and evaluate their comprehension after the task. Goh and Hu found a significant positive correlation between metacognitive awareness and listening performance, indicating that successful listeners actively manage their cognitive processes and employ strategies such as selective attention and inference to compensate for perceptual difficulties [4]. In terms of oral communication, SRL typically involves strategies for managing cognitive load and social interaction, encompassing planning what to say, rehearsing phrases and paraphrasing or clarification when encountering lexical gaps. Recent technological advancements have opened up new avenues for regulation. Li and Zhao highlighted how applications of artificial intelligence (AI) can provide a low-anxiety environment for practicing oral skills and offer immediate feedback, enabling learners to self-correct and independently improve their pronunciation and fluency [5].

In reading and writing, strategies become more complex and integrated. In reading, SRL involves goal-oriented text navigation, mainly using skimming and scanning, and adopting remedial strategies when comprehension is interrupted. Writing, maybe the most cognitively demanding skill, requires extensive self-regulation. Bai and Wang proposed the concept of "self-regulation from reading to writing", proving that learners who effectively regulate the acquisition of information from the text and transform it into their own writing process can achieve higher writing abilities [2]. This involves planning the writing structure, drafting, revising based on self-assessment and managing the inherent emotional frustration during the writing process. Chen further emphasizes that the difference between professional second-language writers lies in their complex self-regulation process during the revision process, where they critically evaluate and improve their own works [6].

2.2. Regulation process dimensions: goal-setting, emotional control, and reflective monitoring

The self-regulation process in ESL learning includes three dimensions: goal setting, emotion control and reflective monitoring. Goal setting is the foundational step of the SRL model, providing direction and motivation [2].

Particularly, challenging and proximal goals are more effective than vague and distant goals. Schunk confirmed that goal setting can enhance self-efficacy and thereby promote sustained effort in learning activities [3]. In the ESL context, this might translate into learners setting goals, such as learning 100 new academic words per day or engaging in a five-minute conversation without using their native language. Abdulhay confirmed a relationship, indicating a positive correlation between clear goal orientation and self-regulation in ESL tasks [7].

Emotion control is the second key dimension, considering that language learners are prone to anxiety and frustration. Language anxiety consumes valuable cognitive resources and directly

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impairs language performance [8]. Therefore, self-regulating learners employ various strategies to cope with them, including using positive self-talk, performing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing before oral tasks, or redefining anxiety as excitement. Gao introduced mindfulness as a powerful mediator. Mindful learners experience lower levels of anxiety and burnout, thereby achieving higher self-perceived language ability as they can maintain continuous focus and engagement through regulating their emotional state [9].

Reflective monitoring is also the metacognitive core of SRL, involving tracking progress, evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and making adjustments as needed. It is a feedback loop connecting current performance and future planning. A self-regulating ESL learner might reflect after a failure. This continuous cycle of self-observation and self-judgment is the key to transforming experiences into expertise. Viberg and Andersson discussed how to facilitate this process through technological support. Mobile learning platforms can provide analytical data to help learners monitor progress and build their learning activities over time [10].

2.3. Influence of cultural and identity factors on strategy preferences

SRL does not occur in a vacuum, it is deeply embedded in the cultural background and evolving identity of the learners. Cultural values and educational traditions significantly influence learners' preferences for certain self-regulation strategies. For example, learners from collectivist cultures may show a stronger preference for social regulation strategies, such as seeking help from peers or teachers and may value collaborative learning activities as a means of regulation. Sulaiman and Thakur observed this in their study of EFL students in Oman, where the cooperative learning structure effectively enhanced cognitive engagement and task completion by aligning with the learning values of the community [11].

Conversely, learners from individualistic backgrounds may be more inclined to independently use strategies and self-assess. The cultural view of authority can affect learners' willingness to seek help. Some may regard asking questions as a challenge to the authority of the teacher rather than an active regulatory strategy. Identity factors also play a crucial role. ESL learners' investment in the target language is often linked to their "imagined community," that is, the future self they hope to become through language learning. A learner who strongly identifies with their future identity as an international professional is likely to demonstrate more persistent goal setting and strategy use in business English contexts compared to a learner without such an identity projection. Amir pointed out that successful Malaysian ESL learners often strategically navigate their dual cultural identities, selectively adopt learning strategies that are both in line with their traditions and their aspirations as global citizens, demonstrating the complex interaction between identity negotiation and self-regulation [12].

3. Typical problems in ESL learners' self-regulated learning

3.1. Vague learning goals and insufficient forethought regulation

A common issue among many ESL learners is setting vague and unspecific learning goals, which significantly impair the initial stage of self-regulation. Learners often state broad intentions like "I want to learn English well" or "I need to improve my spoken English" instead of establishing specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) goals. Such ambiguous goals lack clear direction and benchmarks for tracking progress, leading to reduced motivation and a lack of structured learning efforts [1]. This gap in task analysis and goal setting means learners begin

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their studies without a strategic plan. They might not understand the necessary sub-skills for proficiency, such as distinguishing the vocabulary required for academic writing from that used in casual conversation. Aung and Nikolov suggest that vague goals are associated with less sustainable and less self-determined motivation based on their systematic review [13]. Without a clear roadmap, learners will become easily overwhelmed by difficult tasks, prone to procrastination and less likely to persist through challenges. Their learning activities often become reactive rather than proactive, jumping between resources without a coherent plan, resulting in slow and scattered progress.

3.2. Limited strategy use and deficiency in metacognitive monitoring

Many ESL learners exhibit a limited repertoire of learning strategies and significant deficiencies in metacognitive monitoring. Although they may be familiar with basic memory strategies such as repetition, they often lack knowledge of the more complex metacognitive strategies that are crucial for high-level language processing. For instance, they may not know how to apply inference strategies while reading or use contextual clues to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words. More importantly, there is typically a problem of weak metacognitive monitoring ability, that is, the ability to reflect on one's own thinking. This includes planning for several tasks. Goh and Hu directly linked lower metacognitive awareness with poorer listening performance [4]. A learner who does not monitor their comprehension level when listening to a fast-paced lecture will not be aware of when they have fallen behind the logical cues of the argument, and thus will not be able to adopt compensatory strategies. Similarly, in writing, the deficiency of metacognitive reflection leads to little planning and superficial revisions, as the learner only focuses on superficial errors such as spelling, while ignoring deeper issues like argumentation and coherence [6]. The lack of this "mental mirror" weakens learners' ability to identify their own weaknesses, evaluate the effectiveness of their methods and make necessary improvements to enhance their performance, trapping them in a low-efficiency learning cycle.

3.3. Weak emotional regulation and susceptibility to language anxiety

Emotional regulation poses a significant challenge for ESL learners, with language anxiety being a particularly debilitating issue. Second language anxiety is a unique, self-perceived, belief-based, emotional and behavioral complex that stems from the uniqueness of the language learning process [8]. This anxiety can manifest in all skills, but is most intense in oral tasks, where the fear of negative evaluations, communication concerns and exam anxiety converge. Weak emotional regulation skills mean that learners are not prepared to manage these intense negative emotions. Anxious learners may experience cognitive interference, where worrying thoughts occupy the working memory capacity that should be used for language processing instead of using strategies such as cognitive reappraisal or relaxation techniques. This directly impairs performance, forming a vicious cycle: poor performance due to anxiety reinforces negative self-beliefs, leading to higher anxiety in future situations. The meta-analysis by Teimouri confirmed a significant negative correlation between anxiety and second language scores [8]. In addition to anxiety, learners may also experience frustration due to slow progress, boredom from repetitive practice, or loss of motivation due to not feeling progress. Without strong emotional regulation tools, these emotional factors can lead to burnout, avoidance behaviors (such as skipping oral practice opportunities), resulting in withdrawal from the language learning program. Gao regards this as a key area for intervention, noting that unresolved emotional distress severely undermines the cognitive and metacognitive pillars of SRL [9].

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4. Optimization strategies for ESL learners' self-regulated behaviors

4.1. Guiding goal-setting and building stage-based task systems

To counteract the problem of ambiguous goals, clear teaching and scaffolding in goal setting are indispensable. Educators should not only tell learners to set goals, but also guide them through the process of creating specific, proximal and hierarchical goals. This can be achieved by introducing frameworks such as SMART goals and breaking down the macro goal of achieving fluency into a series of manageable micro goals. For example, a phased task system for writing could start with writing a well-structured paragraph with a clear topic sentence and three supporting details within two weeks, and then gradually progress to writing a five-paragraph essay with a central thesis. This approach makes the learning process less daunting and provides frequent opportunities for success, thereby building self-efficacy, a key motivational factor in SRL [3]. Abdulhay emphasize that clear, mastery-oriented goals are directly related to better self-regulation in writing [7]. Teachers can use tools like learning contracts or goal-setting worksheets to have learners record their specific goals, action plans and success criteria. Additionally, as suggested by Viberg and Andersson, integrating technology can help build this process [10]. Mobile applications can send reminders, track progress on micro goals and visualize achievements, thereby supporting the pre-performance and performance phases of self-regulation and fostering a sense of autonomy and control over the learning journey.

4.2. Teaching strategy frameworks and strengthening metacognitive reflection

Directly and explicitly teaching the framework of metacognitive strategies is an effective way to enhance SRL. Educators should not assume that learners will naturally develop these strategies but should embed strategy instruction into the curriculum. This involves not only teaching learners what strategies are available (e.g., skimming, scanning, elaboration, inference), but also how, when, and why to use them. Instructional models like the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) can be adopted, which systematically integrates content, language and strategy teaching. For instance, a listening comprehension lesson could start with a mini-lesson on planning (predicting content based on the title), monitoring (identifying key words) and evaluating (summarizing main points after listening). Gong and Pang found that strengthening learners' metacognitive knowledge about academic writing directly affects their strategy use and beliefs [14]. To enhance metacognitive reflection, teachers should mandate structured reflection activities. This could include post-task reflection logs where learners answer guiding questions such as "What strategies did I use? How effective were they? What will I change next time?" or "think aloud" protocols where learners verbalize their thought processes as they complete tasks. Chen confirmed that SRL interventions incorporating such metacognitive training have a significant positive impact on second language performance and strategy use [15]. By making thinking visible and regularizing reflection, learners develop the habit of linking actions to outcomes, which is the essence of self-regulated learning.

4.3. Introducing emotional regulation tools to support positive psychological construction

Given the profound influence of emotions on language learning, it is no longer an option but a necessity to clearly teach emotion regulation tools for cultivating resilient self-regulating learners. The intervention measures should aim to equip learners with a toolkit of strategies for managing

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anxiety, frustration and burnout. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), as explored by Gao, are highly effective [9]. Incorporating brief, guided mindfulness exercises at the beginning of the course can help learners concentrate, reduce anxiety and enhance focus. This practice trains learners to observe their anxious thoughts and bodily sensations without judgment, thereby reducing their destructive power. In addition to mindfulness, cognitive behavioral techniques can be taught, such as identifying and challenging irrational beliefs. For example, "I must speak perfectly" can be restructured as "Making mistakes is a normal part of the learning process". Teachers can create a supportive classroom atmosphere, normalize difficulties and frame errors as learning opportunities, thereby reducing the fear of negative evaluations that drives anxiety [8]. Moreover, promoting a growth mindset, believing that abilities can be developed through effort, can enhance emotional resilience. In practical application, educators can introduce anxiety management plans, allowing learners to identify their anxiety triggers and commit in advance to using specific coping strategies, such as positive self-suggestion or rapid breathing exercises. By systematically dealing with the emotional domain, these tools provide support for building a positive psychological foundation, releasing cognitive resources for learning and enabling learners to more fully and persistently engage in the challenging task of acquiring a second language.

5. Conclusion

This article explores the various aspects of self-regulated learning among ESL learners, highlighting their characteristic strategies, processes, and cultural dimensions. It also reveals the common pitfalls that hinder effective self-regulation, including imprecise goal setting, insufficient metacognitive development, and improper management of language anxiety. The comprehensive current research indicates that these challenges are not insurmountable. The proposed optimization strategies, providing systematic guidance in goal setting, clearly teaching metacognitive frameworks and integrating emotional regulation tools, offer a coherent approach for educators to develop SRL. Empowering ESL learners to become self-regulators and transforming them from passive recipients of knowledge to autonomous learners in their own learning journey is of significant importance. This transformation not only enhances language proficiency, but also cultivates their psychological resilience and flexibility in selecting strategies required for lifelong learning and successful participation in the global world. However, this study has several limitations, which point to directions for future research. Firstly, the research is mainly based on existing literature reviews and has not used original data collection methods such as quantitative surveys or longitudinal qualitative case studies to empirically verify the proposed framework of optimization strategies. Secondly, the discussion on individual differences is still rather broad and has not examined the moderating effects of factors such as age, gender and specific educational backgrounds on self-regulation. What's more, although technologies such as artificial intelligence were mentioned, this paper did not systematically analyze how different digital platforms specifically promote or hinder various SRL processes in the ESL context. Future research might as well continue to explore the long-term effects of comprehensive SRL interventions and investigate the role of emerging technologies (such as artificial intelligence) in personalizing and supporting the self-regulation process for different ESL groups.

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