

Investigating the Use of Grammar Learning Strategies in the Learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language in Indian Universities

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Abstract

Grammar is considered one of the most problematic language subsystems to learn worldwide, especially in India. One of the approaches to learning this subsystem is the appropriate use of grammar learning strategies (henceforth, GLS) to master the target language's grammar. The objective of the current research is to analyze the process of grammar learning strategies (GLS) used by Indian university students in learning Spanish as foreign language (SFL) and to examine their relationship to other variables of interest, such as proficiency and year of study. In the present study, the methodology used is quantitative in nature, and the participants are from three public universities learning Spanish as foreign language. The instrument used is an adapted version of a previously validated questionnaire called the Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI). The results show that students use GLS to address corrective feedback more frequently, followed by social and metacognitive strategies. The results also underscore a statistically significant difference in the use of GLS amongst the groups when compared with the variable proficiency. At the same time, there was no significant difference in use when the groups were compared by year of study. Finally, the educational and instructional implications, along with the limitations of the current research, are provided.

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1 Introduction

There has been a paradigm shift in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) over the last decade, wherein the attention has been shifted from teacher-centred learning to learner-centred teaching, taking into account learners' individual differences. Within this change, one of the areas of research that has emerged significantly is that of language learning strategies (LLS), which started precisely looking precisely at the question of individual differences in the learning process and language attainment (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Hosenfeld, 1976; Naiman et al., 1978). Dörnyei and

Ryan (2015) suggest that one of the reasons for this interest lies in the fact that exploring language learning strategies could provide a tool for examining and explaining individual differences in input-output in the process of L2 learning.

Within this LLS field, one of the important areas which has been rather neglected is grammar learning strategies (GLS) that second or foreign language learners (L2) make use of in the process of learning a second or foreign language and employing its grammar structures (Cohen et al., 2011; Oxford, 2007, 2017; Pawlak, 2018, 2020). Grammar is considered one of the most problematic language subsystems to learn, and its instruction has been marginalised since the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching (Byram & Mendez García, 2009). This is somewhat true because grammar is not merely a set of static rules but represents a dynamic process, something Larsen-Freeman calls “*grammaring*” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003), that learners find difficult to master and apply in real communication. Another important point is the need for explicit knowledge and a focus on form when teaching grammar (Ellis, 2006). In this sense, grammar poses persistent challenges in second-language acquisition because the learners struggle to transfer explicit knowledge into fluent, real-time communicative use. However, at the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a debate on the importance of the contextual use of grammar wherein a balance is maintained between the *focus on meaning* (theoretical equivalent of communicative language teaching, Loewen, 2018) and *form-focused instruction* (any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form, Ellis, 2001). In this context, it is also important to mention the concept of integrated grammar instruction, which is defined as “grammar instruction embedded in communicative activities” (Sato & Oyanedel, 2019) and is more effective than decontextualized grammar instruction (Ellis, 2015, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Loewen & Sato, 2017). In the same line, Wong and VanPatten (2003) indicate that form-only foreign language activities and mechanical drills are not beneficial for foreign language acquisition and conclude that they should not be part of instructional practices.

In the Indian context, grammar teaching and learning acquire another dimension, as learners pay more attention to grammar and its structure. Ranjan et al. (2021) reported that 62% of participating Indian learners identified grammar as the most difficult language subsystem. The same study concluded that this result is not strange, as the instructors still “attach great importance to the grammatical aspects of the language” (p. 87) in most cases. Learning a foreign language outside the target-language environment is itself a challenge, as students lack exposure to the target culture and language; the same is true in the Indian context (Gadre, 2005). In many higher education institutions offering full-time programs in foreign languages, particularly Spanish, instructors may not explicitly employ the Grammar-Translation Method. Nevertheless, students often develop translation-based learning habits from the outset of their studies. This tendency can be attributed to their multilingual backgrounds and sociolinguistic environments, which naturally encourage learners to draw on their existing linguistic repertoires and establish cross-linguistic connections when processing new language input (Philominraj et al., 2021; Ranjan, 2018; Singh, 2009). In this type of scenario, they start paying more attention to grammar and translation. Keeping this context in mind, the current research seeks to understand the use of GLS by Indian university students in learning Spanish as foreign language (SFL) and to determine the relationship between this use and self-reported proficiency level and year of study. Examining these links (between GLU use and self-perceived proficiency, and between GLU use and year of study) will definitely generate new, valuable insights that, in turn, will advance the theoretical base for language education.

2 Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1 Definition of GLS

Oxford et al. (2007) defined GLS as “actions or thoughts that learners consciously employ to

make language learning and/or language use easier, more effective, more efficient, and more enjoyable” (p. 117). There are two elements important in this definition: the first is conscious effort, and the second is language learning and/or language use. One of the important characteristics of learning strategies is the element of consciousness. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) mention that there exists a difference among processes, procedures (procedural skills), and strategies. They pointed out that strategies transform into a process (procedural skill) and become automatic and unconscious with frequent use. This element has been further discussed by Cohen (2014) and Griffiths (2008, 2018). The second element takes into consideration the aspect of learning and use. The fluid nature of learning strategies makes it difficult to distinguish between second-language learning strategies and second-language use strategies when conducting research in this field (Oxford, 2011, 2017). For Pawlak (2013), grammar learning and grammar use are intertwined because grammar learning involves understanding and remembering grammar rules and attempting to use them “in spontaneous, real-time communication”. While mentioning the very limited number of empirical investigations in the area of GLS, Cohen et al. (2011) described them as “deliberate thoughts and actions that students consciously employ for learning and getting better control over the use of grammar structures” (p. 64). Pawlak (2020) has rightly noted that this definition does not limit itself to knowledge of L2 grammar and the memorisation of rules, but also entails developing the ability to use them appropriately in different contexts.

Oxford (2017) provides an encompassing definition of this construct referring to them as “teachable, dynamic thoughts and behaviours that learners consciously select and employ in specific contexts to improve their self-regulated, autonomous L2 grammar development for effective task performance and long-term proficiency” (p. 244). For Pawlak (2018), the skilful employment of GLS, has a key role in learning L2 grammar, whether GLS are meant to learn rules, or “automatize these rules”. The employment of strategies can be an efficient way to learn challenging grammar rules and help with their correct use and application (Cohen, 2014). For this study, GLS is considered both as a strategy used for grammar learning and as the dynamic thoughts and actions consciously selected and employed by learners to enhance their knowledge of L2 grammar, to remember rules, and to develop the ability to use them appropriately in different contexts.

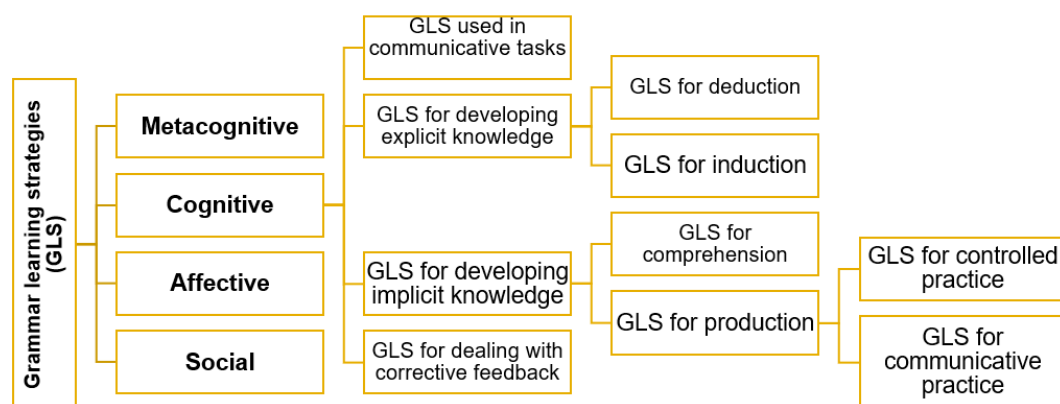
2.2 Classification of GLS

There have been some attempts to provide a classification of GLS (Cohen & Pinilla-Herrera, 2010; Oxford et al., 2007; Pawlak, 2009, 2013, 2018). The first study (Cohen & Pinilla-Herrera, 2010) is limited to the study of Spanish grammar learning strategies, based on data gathered from teachers and students regarding the grammatical structures they find difficult. The data from this study were used to design a website and provide ideas for applying GLS research in foreign language education. Oxford et al. (2007), drawing on studies of form-focused instruction (Ellis, 2002; Doughty & Williams, 1998), related GLS to techniques of grammar instruction, namely implicit focus on meaning, implicit focus on form, and explicit inductive and explicit deductive. This classification made a distinction between implicit and explicit learning. While the former primarily focuses on meaning with occasional attention to form, the latter is both inductive and deductive in nature. The same is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Typology of GLS of the participants adopted from Oxford et al. (2007, p.120)

Characteristics	Instructional Modes			
	Implicit mode		Explicit Mode	
	Focus on meaning (FonM)- avoidance of grammar in the classroom	Focus on Form (FonF)	Inductive	Deductive
Primary focus on meaning	Yes	Yes	No	No
Target form made explicit.	No	No	No	Yes
Target form enhanced or otherwise made noticeable	No	Yes	No	N/A (rule already explicit)
Grammar rule supplied	No	No	No	Yes
Learners directed to induce grammar rules.	No	No	Yes	N/A (rule already explicit)

Drawing on earlier research on LLS in general (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) and GLS in particular, Pawlak (2009, 2013, 2018) developed a comprehensive classification model of GLS (Figure 1). According to Pawlak (2018), this classification model is general and not target language (TL)-specific, and is based on existing, comprehensive divisions of the methodological possibilities for teaching target language grammar. In this model, GLS has been divided into four categories: metacognitive, cognitive, affective, and social. The cognitive strategies are further subdivided into four parts: GLS used in communicative tasks, GLS used to develop explicit and implicit knowledge of grammar, and GLS employed for dealing with corrective feedback.

**Fig. 1. Grammar learning strategies classification proposed by Pawlak (2018)**

2.3 Research conducted in the field of GLS and its relation to proficiency

Research studies in this field have shown that strategies for designating noun gender are influenced by factors such as age, L2 development status, and L1-L2 type, among other elements (Oxford, 2017). Other studies have shown the effectiveness of explicit strategy training alongside explicit grammar instruction (Gimeno, 2002), no statistically significant difference in the frequency of GLS use between successful and unsuccessful learners (Tilfarlioğlu, 2005), and frequent use of metacognitive GLS (Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2008).

In the Indian context, teaching Spanish presents unique challenges (Kumar, 2024) as students come from different cultural backgrounds and speak a variety of native languages (Ranjan, 2018). Besides, some studies have been conducted on grammar in the context of learning Spanish as a

foreign language. In his doctoral research, Kumar (2023) found that the largest proportion of morphosyntactic errors among Indian learners occurs in verbs (47.6%). He further suggests that this result indicates that the Spanish verb conjugation pattern and its functioning cause difficulties for Indian learners. He also highlighted that the grammatical errors involving prepositions and pronouns are relatively minor compared with the other morphosyntactic elements studied in his research. Izquierdo (2017) points out, in relation to phonetics, that Hindi speakers face difficulty in remembering and distinguishing diphthongs, as there is very little presence of diphthongs in Hindi. In another study, Kumar (2024) underscored an important area in teaching Spanish grammar in the Indian context: the distinction between the preterite and the imperfect. He further notes that Hindi and Spanish do not belong to the same language family, and that comparing the use of elements such as determiners could significantly help students. Another topic that has been researched is the role of transference and interference (positive and negative transfer) among Hindi and Spanish learners (Gadre, 1996, 2005; Kumar, 2023; Kumar, 2017). In a recent study, Pawlak (2018) examined the validity and reliability of the Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI) in a sample of 106 learners. With its high construct validity, the results indicated that the GLSI is a valid and reliable tool for gathering data on the GLS.

Research has shown a positive correlation between strategic learning in general and proficiency (Martínez et al., 2016; Radwan, 2011; Ranjan et al., 2021). Research has also examined the relationship between GLS and proficiency (Al Abri et al., 2017) and its role in enhancing learners' grammar abilities (Briewin et al., 2013). In the Indian context, research studies have been carried out in the field of SFL on themes like foreign language teaching methodology (Rai, 2017), learning strategies (Ranjan et al., 2021), interculturality (Ansari & Sahay, 2020), literary text use in teaching foreign language (Kumar & Saumya, 2018), among others. However, no study was found that explicitly dealt with the topic of the current research study, the use of GLS and its relationship with other learner variables, in the Indian context. The purpose of this study is to answer the research questions and to address the existing knowledge gap by examining self-reported GLS among the participating students. Knowledge of the grammar strategies learners employ, their relationship to proficiency, and other variables will help inform pedagogical decisions in the classroom.

Research studies suggest that GLS are important tools for learning grammar, but there is a dearth of exhaustive research on their use in learning foreign languages in the Indian context. With these discussions in mind, the objective of the present research is to analyse the grammar learning strategies (GLS) used by Indian university students in learning SFL and to determine their relation to other variables such as self-reported grammar proficiency and duration of study. In continuation, the research questions of the current research are mentioned.

Research questions

1. What type of grammar learning strategies (GLS) do the students report using in learning Spanish as foreign language (SFL) in Indian universities? What is their hierarchy in the learning process?
2. How is the reported use of GLS related to the different self-reported grammar proficiency levels of the students of SFL in Indian universities?
3. How does the employment of GLS vary with the duration of study in university settings?

3 Methodology

The current quantitative research has been developed within the positivist paradigm, employing a transversal study design, as it investigates relationships between variables without manipulating them or tracking changes over time, analysing them at a single point in time. This is a descriptive, correlational study in which self-reported GLS has been explored and analysed using statistical and

interpretative tools. Proficiency in the present study was measured using a self-reported proficiency level from 1 to 7, where 1 is the least proficient and 7 is the highest.

3.1 Participants

The participants were 106 undergraduate university students (49 females, 57 males) from three public universities in India. The sample is presented below by variable, including gender (Table 2), age (Table 3), year of study (Table 4), and medium of instruction (Table 5). The three selected universities are public and located in northern India. While one of the universities has been a pioneering Centre of Spanish teaching for more than 50 years, the other two departments are quite new by comparison. They all offer full-time graduate and postgraduate programmes in Spanish. In the present case, the universities imparting Certificate and Diploma courses were not considered. University 1 was located in New Delhi, University 2 in Aligarh, and University 3 in Dehradun. All the selected universities are considered important centres of foreign language education. The participants were divided into three levels, each corresponding to a year of study: first, second, and third year. In Table 4, a sample distribution by year of study is presented. Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) is a graduate-level program after the completion of the senior secondary examination. These Centres, as such, do not follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), but a rough estimate based on the curriculum and proficiency level would be: the first year corresponds to the A1-A2 level of the CEFR, the second year to B1, and the third year to B2. Participants are students from a Hindi-language background who entered university after completing their senior secondary examination and have roughly a B1-B2 level of proficiency in English. They are all complete beginners in learning Spanish as a foreign language, and the curriculum is presented in a graded way, including components of the history and civilisation of Spanish-speaking countries, as well as Hispanic literature and translation.

Table 2. Sample distribution by gender

Variable	Universities	University 1	University 2	University 3	Total	%
Gender	Male	17	33	7	57	54
	Female	17	16	16	49	46
	Total	34	49	23	106	100

Table 3. Sample distribution by age

Variable	Universities	University 1	University 2	University 3	Total	%
Age	17-19	5	21	14	40	38
	20	16	11	6	33	31
	21-25	13	17	3	33	31
	Total	34	49	23	106	100

Table 4. Sample distribution by year of study

Variable	Universities	University 1	University 2	University 3	Total	%
Year of study	B.A First year	1	18	13	32	30
	B.A Second year	18	21	3	42	40
	B.A Third year	15	10	7	32	30
	Total	34	49	23	106	100

Table 5. Sample distribution by medium of instruction

		University 1	University 2	University 3	Total	%
Medium of instruction*	English	20	43	17	80	75
	Spanish	14	5	3	22	21
	Hindi	0	1	3	4	4
	Total	34	49	23	106	100

*As reported by the participants

3.2 Research instrument

To measure GLS, the questionnaire was adapted from Pawlak (2018), who developed the Grammar Learning Strategy Inventory (GLSI). This research instrument is a structured questionnaire on general grammar strategies, comprising 70 items on a 5-point Likert scale to evaluate GLS use. The questionnaire is divided into 4 categories of strategies: metacognitive (8 items), cognitive (50 items), affective (7 items), and social (5 items). Within the cognitive section, there are four sections: production and comprehension of grammar in communication tasks (9 items), explicit knowledge of grammar (25 items), implicit knowledge of grammar (10 items), and corrective feedback (6 items). In the current study, after obtaining approval from Prof. Pawlak, the researchers adapted the questionnaire to account for contextual, cultural, and environmental factors. The final questionnaire has the following components.

Table 6. N° of items in the original and adapted questionnaire

Types of GLS		N° of items	
		Original questionnaire	Adapted questionnaire
Metacognitive		8	7
Cognitive	Cognitive	50	33
	GLS used in communicative tasks	9	7
	GLS for developing explicit knowledge	25	12
	GLS for developing implicit knowledge	10	8
	GLS for dealing with corrective feedback	6	6
Affective		7	5
Social		5	5
GLS (Total)		70	50

This instrument has been empirically tested and proved to be valid in studies by Pawlak (2013, 2020) and is a reliable instrument for data collection in the field of GLS in learning trajectories. On earlier occasions, this questionnaire yielded high content and face validity and greater reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha. In the present case, the questionnaire was adapted and adjusted to the Indian context, and three experts in linguistics validated it before it was applied to the study sample.

3.3 Ethical considerations, data collection, and analysis

First of all, the researchers would like to state that the research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and in accordance with local statutory requirements. The department coordinators in the respective universities were contacted to explain the objectives and purpose of the research. Thereafter, a formal request was sent to them to allow the application of the instruments. The participants were contacted by the respective university coordinators. The researchers ensured that the participants were fully informed about the research, including its purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. The data were collected online via a Google Form, and the first

part included a consent form with all relevant research details and a statement that the survey data would be used only for academic purposes. Each participant must provide consent to proceed with the survey. Because the questionnaire was anonymous (no name required) and administered online, experimenter bias was eliminated. Once they clicked consent, they could proceed and complete the survey. All the ethical considerations were followed throughout the research process. The data collected were kept anonymised, minimising potential risks to participants. The data were analysed using SPSS version 23.

4 Results

To examine the internal validity and reliability of the adopted questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha test was carried out. The results are shown in Table 7. In this case, it was very high ($\alpha = .95$) for the overall GLS and within the acceptable range for all GLS categories.

Table 7. Cronbach's alpha test

Cronbach's alpha test		N° of items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Metacognitive		7	.90
Cognitive	Cognitive	33	
	GLS used in communicative tasks	7	.90
	GLS for developing explicit knowledge	12	.94
	GLS for developing implicit knowledge	8	.92
	GLS for dealing with corrective feedback	6	.93
Affective		5	.81
Social		5	.89
GLS (Total)		50	.95

RQ 1. Type and hierarchy of grammar learning strategies (GLS)

The first research question examined the types of GLS that participating students reported using to learn SFL in Indian universities and the hierarchy among them. Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics (Mean, SD, Minimum, and Maximum) of the different types of GLS.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for the type of GLS of the participants

Descriptive Statistics					
		N	Min.	Max.	Mean SD
Metacognitive		106	1	5	3.51 .89
Cognitive	Cognitive	106			3.39 .83
	GLS used in communicative tasks	106	1	5	3.49 .91
	GLS for developing explicit knowledge	106	1	5	3.39 .90
	GLS for developing implicit knowledge	106	1	5	3.29 .89
	GLS for dealing with corrective feedback	106	1	5	3.61 .99
Affective		106	1	5	3.28 .90
Social		106	1	5	3.60 .98
GLS (Total)		106			3.42 .82

Table 9 shows the hierarchy of types of GLS. The most used ones are GLS for dealing with corrective feedback ($M=3.61$, $SD=0.99$) and social ($M=3.60$, $SD=0.98$). The least-used GLS, as reported by the students, were GLS for developing implicit knowledge ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.89$) and affective ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.90$).

Table 9. Hierarchy of GLS

Hierarchy of GLS	N	Mean	Rank
GLS for dealing with corrective feedback	106	3.61	1
Social	106	3.60	2
Metacognitive	106	3.51	3
GLS used in communicative tasks	106	3.49	4
GLS for developing explicit knowledge	106	3.39	5
GLS for developing implicit knowledge	106	3.29	6
Affective	106	3.28	7

Table 10 shows the important items from each category of grammar learning strategies that have a mean value of 3.50 or higher ($M \geq 3.50$). This mean value was selected based on the Strategy Use Results Profile Key given by Oxford (1990) to categorise the use of language learning strategies and has been used in various other research studies (Ranjan & Philominraj, 2020; Philominraj et al., 2021).

Table 10. Important GLS with a mean value equal to or above 3.50

		Mean	SD
Social	I like to be corrected when I make mistakes using grammar structures.	3.80	1.17
Meta	I pay attention to grammar structures in my own speaking and writing.	3.79	1.18
Cog2	I pay attention to rules provided by the teacher or course book.	3.79	1.17
Cog4	I pay attention to teacher correction when I do grammar exercises and try to repeat the correct version.	3.78	1.14
Cog1	I use Google or other search engines to see how a specific grammar structure is used in meaningful contexts.	3.74	1.17
Cog4	I listen carefully for any feedback the teacher gives me about the structures I use.	3.71	1.21
Social	I try to help others when they have problems with understanding or using grammar.	3.70	1.03
Cog2	I try to understand every grammar rule.	3.68	1.07
Meta	I know my strengths and weaknesses when it comes to grammar.	3.66	1.10
Cog4	I try to notice and self-correct my mistakes when practicing grammar.	3.65	1.16
Meta	I pay attention to grammar structures when reading and listening.	3.64	1.05
Cog1	I notice (or remember) structures that are repeated often in the text.	3.60	1.08
Aff	I encourage myself to practice grammar when I know I have problems with a structure.	3.59	1.06
Social	I ask the teacher to repeat or explain a grammar point if I do not understand.	3.57	1.29
Cog4	I try to notice how the correct version differs from my own and improve what I said.	3.56	1.14
Social	I ask the teacher or more proficient learners to help me with grammar structures.	3.55	1.21
Cog1	I try to use specific grammar structures in communication (e.g., use of past tense in telling a story).	3.52	1.07
Meta	I try to find more effective ways of learning grammar.	3.50	1.13
Cog4	I notice when I am corrected on grammar in spontaneous communication (e.g., when giving opinions).	3.50	1.13

Cog 1-GLS used in communicative tasks, Cog 2- GLS for developing explicit knowledge, Cog 3- GLS for developing implicit knowledge, Cog 4- GLS for dealing with corrective feedback

RQ 2. Use of GLS and proficiency

The second research question of the study concerned the use of GLS and its relationship to the self-reported proficiency levels of students learning Spanish as a foreign language in Indian universities. For this purpose, participants were asked to rate themselves on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, where 1 was the least proficient and 7 the most proficient. Table 11 shows the number of students who evaluated themselves on a scale of 1-7.

Table 11. % of participants according to self-evaluation

Evaluate yourself	N	% of N
1-4	47	44
5	37	35
6-7	22	21
Total	106	100%

Similarly, Table 12 presents the descriptive statistics (Mean, SD, Minimum, and Maximum) for the different types of GLS across self-reported proficiency levels. A clear difference in the mean use of GLS is evident between the two categories, i.e., the higher-proficiency and lower-proficiency groups. For example for group 1 (those who evaluated themselves 1), the metacognitive GLS (M=1.71, SD=0.45), affective GLS (M=2.16, SD=0.68), social GLS (M=2.48, SD=0.48), and Cognitive GLS (M=1.97, SD=0.28), are in sharp contrast to their counterparts of group 7 (those who evaluated themselves 7) the metacognitive GLS (M=4.00, SD=1.25), affective GLS (M=3.84, SD=1.25), social GLS (M=3.94, SD=1.26), and Cognitive GLS (M=3.76, SD=1.17).

Table 12. Descriptive statistics of GLS use according to self-reported proficiency level

	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	M*	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Meta	1.71	0.45	2.86	-	3.15	0.94	3.34	0.56	3.73	0.67	3.98	0.94	4.00	1.25
Aff.	2.16	0.68	3.40	-	2.95	1.00	3.10	0.71	3.45	0.76	3.50	1.02	3.84	1.25
Social	2.48	0.48	3.20	-	3.27	1.23	3.54	0.84	3.78	0.82	3.73	1.20	3.94	1.26
Cog.	1.97	0.28	2.85	-	2.98	1.01	3.29	0.57	3.57	0.61	3.79	0.93	3.76	1.17
GLS	2.00	0.29	2.94	-	3.03	0.98	3.31	0.57	3.60	0.58	3.78	0.92	3.82	1.19

*M- Mean, Meta- Metacognitive, Aff. - Affective, Cog.- Cognitive

The assumption of normality was not met for the data in this study. Therefore, the ANOVA test was not suitable for comparing the groups, and the Kruskal–Wallis test, a nonparametric equivalent of the F test, was used to analyse non-normal data (Dodge, 2008). The test revealed statistically significant differences in the use of GLS (overall) and in all types of GLS except social GLS across the different self-reported grammar proficiency levels of the students. The test showed the following results (Table 13).

χ^2 (6, N= 106) =27.66, $p < .001$ - Metacognitive

χ^2 (6, N= 106) =12.37, $p > .054$ - Social

χ^2 (6, N= 106) =23.23, $p < .001$ - Cognitive

χ^2 (6, N= 106) =16.03, $p < .014$ - Affective

χ^2 (6, N= 106) =22.99, $p < .001$ - GLS (overall)

Table 13. Kruskal-Wallis Test to evaluate the statistical difference proficiency-wise

	Metacognitive	Social	Cognitive	Affective	GLS (Total)
Chi-square	27.66	12.37	23.23	16.03	22.99
df	6	6	6	6	6
Asymp. Sig.	.001	.054	.001	.014	.001

Similarly, the test revealed statistically significant differences in the use of different types of cognitive GLS across students' self-reported levels of grammar proficiency. The test results are presented in Table 14.

χ^2 (6, N= 106) =26.73, $p < .001$ - GLS used in communicative tasks
 χ^2 (6, N= 106) =21.67, $p < .001$ - GLS for developing explicit knowledge
 χ^2 (6, N= 106) =22.02, $p < .001$ - GLS for developing implicit knowledge
 χ^2 (6, N= 106) =14.64, $p < .023$ - GLS for dealing with corrective feedback

Table 14. Kruskal-Wallis Test to evaluate the statistical difference in cognitive GLS use

	GLS used in communicative tasks	GLS for developing explicit knowledge	GLS for developing implicit knowledge	GLS for dealing with corrective feedback
Chi-square	26.73	21.67	22.02	14.64
df	6	6	6	6
Asymp Sig	.001	.001	.001	.023

Finally, to examine the relationships among the various GLS pairs, Spearman's Rho was used, a non-parametric test that quantifies the strength of association between two variables. In this scenario, this test helped examine the relationship between GLS and proficiency levels by showing the strength of their association. Table 15 shows the results of this test, and many statistically significant correlations were found. For example, proficiency level was found to be correlated with metacognitive and cognitive GLS, as well as with overall GLS. All other pairs of GLS were moderately or strongly correlated with each other, as evident from the results shown in Table 15. The results also suggest that effective language learners employ multiple learning strategies simultaneously. These results are consistent with the theoretical underpinnings outlined by Oxford (1990), which establish that all strategy subgroups work together. While all strategy categories contribute positively to proficiency, metacognitive strategies appear to be the most influential, highlighting the importance of self-regulation, planning, monitoring, and reflection in language learning.

Table 15. Spearman's Rho correlation to examine the strength of association between GLS pairs and proficiency level

Spearman's rho correlation		Meta.	Cog.	Affect.	Social	Overall	Proficiency level
Meta.	ρ (rho)	1.000	0.817**	0.659**	0.713**	0.856**	0.474**
	N	106	106	106	106	106	106
Cog.	ρ (rho)	0.817**	1.000	0.798**	0.854**	0.989**	0.427**
	N	106	106	106	106	106	106
Affect.	ρ (rho)	0.659**	0.798**	1.000	0.725**	0.836**	0.347**
	N	106	106	106	106	106	106
Social	ρ (rho)	0.713**	0.854**	0.725**	1.000	0.888**	0.296**
	N	106	106	106	106	106	106
Overall	ρ (rho)	0.856**	0.989**	0.836**	0.888**	1.000	0.423**
	N	106	106	106	106	106	106
Proficiency level	ρ (rho)	0.474**	0.427**	0.347**	0.296**	0.423**	1.000
	N	106	106	106	106	106	106

** indicates statistical significance at $p < .01$. All reported correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

RQ 3. Use of GLS and year of study

To respond to RQ 3, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted, as the data were not normally distributed. In this case, GLS use was the dependent variable. A careful examination of Table 16 confirms that second-year participating students employ these strategies more frequently than their first- and third-year counterparts. This result is quite interesting, as earlier studies have found that the use of learning strategies increases with study duration and experience. The following results can be interpreted through the theory of procedural skills (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), which holds that when strategies are used frequently, they tend to become procedural skills and thereafter become automatic and unconscious. Therefore, for third-year students, these strategies may have become autonomous and become part of the learning process. The same is almost true for the four categories of cognitive GLS use. Table 16 shows the mean values of the GLS use year-wise, and Table 17 presents the use of different cognitive GLS.

Table 16. Descriptive statistics: use of GLS year-wise

		N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
GLS (overall)	First Year	32	3.40	.94	1.02	4.74
	Second Year	42	3.52	.74	2.08	4.92
	Third Year	32	3.28	.80	1.18	4.94
	Total	106	3.42	.82	1.02	4.94
Metacognitive	First Year	32	3.49	1.09	1.00	5.00
	Second Year	42	3.57	.74	2.29	5.00
	Third Year	32	3.45	.90	1.43	5.00
	Total	106	3.51	.90	1.00	5.00
Cognitive	First Year	32	3.35	.93	1.03	4.64
	Second Year	42	3.51	.76	2.00	4.88
	Third Year	32	3.26	.83	1.18	4.91
	Total	106	3.39	.83	1.03	4.91
Affective	First Year	32	3.27	1.01	1.00	5.00
	Second Year	42	3.40	.78	2.00	5.00
	Third Year	32	3.13	.97	1.00	5.00
	Total	106	3.28	.91	1.00	5.00
Social	First Year	32	3.70	1.02	1.00	5.00
	Second Year	42	3.70	.93	2.00	5.00

Third Year	32	3.36	.99	1.00	5.00
Total	106	3.60	.98	1.00	5.00

Table 17. Descriptive statistics: use of different cognitive GLS year-wise

Cognitive GLS		N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
GLS used in communicative tasks	First Year	32	3.41	1.06	1.00	4.71
	Second Year	42	3.57	.77	2.00	5.00
	Third Year	32	3.48	.94	1.29	5.00
	Total	106	3.49	.91	1.00	5.00
GLS for developing explicit knowledge	First Year	32	3.34	.96	1.00	4.75
	Second Year	42	3.54	.88	1.75	5.00
	Third Year	32	3.25	.89	1.00	5.00
	Total	106	3.39	.91	1.00	5.00
GLS for developing implicit knowledge	First Year	32	3.32	.95	1.00	5.00
	Second Year	42	3.46	.79	2.00	5.00
	Third Year	32	3.05	.95	1.00	5.00
	Total	106	3.29	.90	1.00	5.00
GLS for dealing with corrective feedback	First Year	32	3.58	1.09	1.00	5.00
	Second Year	42	3.72	.91	2.00	5.00
	Third Year	32	3.50	1.01	1.00	5.00
	Total	106	3.61	.99	1.00	5.00

Nevertheless, when the groups were compared for statistical significance, no statistically significant differences were found in the use of any GLS category (Table 18) or in the four categories of cognitive GLS (Table 19).

Table 18. Kruskal-Wallis Test to evaluate the statistical difference proficiency-wise

	Metacognitive	Social	Cognitive	Affective	GLS (Total)
Chi-square	.223	2.46	1.69	2.18	1.54
df	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.084	.292	.429	.336	.462

Table 19. Kruskal-Wallis Test to evaluate the statistical difference within cognitive GLS

	GLS used in communicative tasks	GLS for developing explicit knowledge	GLS for developing implicit knowledge	GLS for dealing with corrective feedback
Chi-square	.038	1.82	3.57	.69
df	2	2	2	2
Asymp Sig	.981	.403	.168	.708

5 Discussion

This section presents a brief discussion of the study's key findings and links and compares them with the existing literature. The first thing to observe is the high SD value in the responses, which suggests substantial variation in the employment of GLS and that the responses of the participating students fluctuate. In the case of the important GLS with a mean value equal to or above 3.50 (Table 10), the first GLS belongs to the metacognitive category: "I like to be corrected when I make mistakes using grammar structures" (M=3.80, SD=1.17). This GLS shows that the students want to be socially involved when learning grammar and, in a way, hope for external help when making mistakes. This can be explained well by Vygotsky's theory of learning (1978), using concepts such as

the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The learner is likely to be corrected for any mistakes that he/she commits in their learning process and hopes to receive guidance from the MKO through scaffolding.

The second and third GLS belong to the metacognitive and cognitive category; “I pay attention to grammar structures in my own speaking and writing” ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.18$) and “I pay attention to rules provided by the teacher or course book” ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.17$). These two GLS have the same mean and almost the same SD values. The metacognitive GLS shows that students consistently keep grammatical structures in mind in their communication and writing. This may be partly true because the participating foreign-language students place high importance on the grammatical aspects of the language and somehow “internalise the translation pattern due to the multilingual environment” (Ranjan et al., 2021, p. 87). They show a high “dependence on grammar and translation for the purpose of expressing themselves in Spanish” (Philominraj et al., 2021, p. 964). It is not surprising to note the other GLS for developing explicit knowledge, which refers to paying attention to the teacher or the course book. This GLS also reflects Indian classrooms, where the teacher is considered the main protagonist in the learning process, while students receive less prominence (Ranjan, 2018).

Next in line is the GLS for dealing with corrective feedback. This is important in the context of Indian classrooms, where students place importance on their teachers. The GLS is “I pay attention to teacher correction when I do grammar exercises and try to repeat the correct version” ($M=3.78$, $SD=1.14$). Therefore, it is evident that students take corrective feedback seriously and later work on it autonomously. The next GLS is using search engines to see how a specific grammar structure is used in meaningful contexts ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.17$). This is not surprising, as earlier research in Indian contexts on the use of TICs has shown positive acceptance among students for learning Spanish as foreign language (Ranjan et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2022; Sahay, 2017). Ranjan et al. (2021) reported in their research that students make use of online resources to practice linguistic structures.

The next GLS in the table is “I listen carefully for any feedback the teacher gives me about the structures I use” ($M=3.71$, $SD=1.21$). This is in line with the above explanation of student-teacher dynamic relations in the Indian context, wherein all feedback is carefully engaged by the students. The social GLS “I try to help others when they have problems with understanding or using grammar” ($M=3.70$, $SD=1.03$) indicates that students want to be socially involved with their friends. Besides, this is obvious, as foreign-language learning communities, in this case the Spanish language, are very small and have few opportunities to familiarise themselves with the target language (Gadre, 2005; Philominraj et al., 2021). Therefore, they help each other in the language-learning process, especially with grammar-related problems.

Another GLS for developing explicit knowledge employed by the students is trying to understand every grammar rule ($M=3.68$, $SD=1.07$). This is true for two reasons: 1. the teaching methodology followed by some teachers, who still often follow the traditional Grammar- Translation method; 2. the multilingual Indian context provides the students with a background for contrasting the grammar rules (Ranjan, 2018; Philominraj et al., 2021), and they try to internalise all grammar rules learnt in the formal settings.

Next is the metacognitive GLS of knowing one’s own strengths and weaknesses in grammar ($M=3.66$, $SD=1.10$). It is followed by the GLS for corrective feedback on noticing and self-correcting mistakes when practising grammar ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.16$), and another metacognitive skill of paying attention to grammar structures while reading and listening ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.16$). These three GLS point towards the metacognitive abilities of the learners, which are important during grammar learning. Another relevant point is that the students place greater importance on productive skills (speaking and writing) than on receptive skills (reading and listening), as indicated by the data. This is again related to the methodology used in Indian foreign-language classrooms, wherein greater emphasis is placed on developing writing and speaking skills.

There are four cognitive, two social, and one metacognitive and affective GLS, each between the mean values of 3.50 and 3.60. Within the cognitive GLS, two are from corrective feedback, and

the other two are used for communicative tasks. Two social GLS are somewhat related to the teacher in explaining and helping with grammar structures. In particular, the social GLS of asking for help can again be explained by the sociocultural theory of learning and the role of scaffolding in the learning process. Interestingly, there is only one affective GLS in the higher usage list with a mean value greater than 3.50, which is “I encourage myself to practice grammar when I know I have problems with a structure” ($M=3.59$, $SD=1.06$). This also demonstrates that the students did not report using affective GLS, as evidenced by the GLS hierarchy list (Table 2). The metacognitive GLS of finding more effective ways of learning grammar has a mean value of 3.50 ($SD = 1.13$). This GLS shows that the students are keen to look for new ways to learn grammar structures.

To identify the most frequently used category of GLS after applying the GLS questionnaire, the data were recoded into a categorical variable. The researchers presumed that the highest mean value in the GLS category indicated the participant’s most frequently used GLS category. Based on this adaptation, the results are presented in Graph 1. According to Graph 1, 36% of the participating students belonged to the social GLS category, followed by 28% in the metacognitive, 11% in the cognitive, and 9% in the affective. This result aligns with the overall hierarchy presented, except for the cognitive category (Table 9).

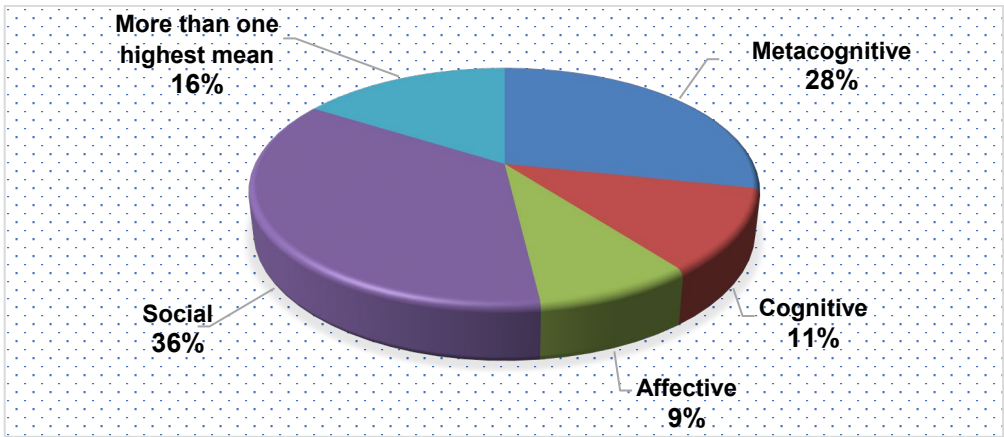


Fig. 2. Percentage of participants according to their reported mean in different types of GLS

Within the cognitive category, the same technique was applied for the four subcategories. The highest mean value within each subcategory was considered the most frequently employed cognitive category. The results are presented in Graph 2, which shows that 31% belonged to GLS used in communicative tasks, 26% to GLS for developing explicit knowledge, 23% to GLS for dealing with corrective feedback, and 10% to GLS for developing implicit knowledge. It is quite interesting to note that the Indian students do not attach much importance to the development of implicit knowledge, which is significant. This is also evident in the hierarchy table, where this cognitive category is the least valued by students, with a mean of 3.29. This may also be explained by the teaching methodology and the overall cultural framework within which students learn foreign languages in India. They are always exposed to and required to complete grammar exercises aimed at developing explicit knowledge, and at some point they notice a contrast between their mother tongue and the foreign language. Indian students, due to their multilingual training from the very beginning, have this tendency to translate and contrast two-language systems. Therefore, most students start using translation as a tool during conversations, and in such scenarios, grammar plays an important role. The current results also suggest that learners are attentive to internalising grammar rules.

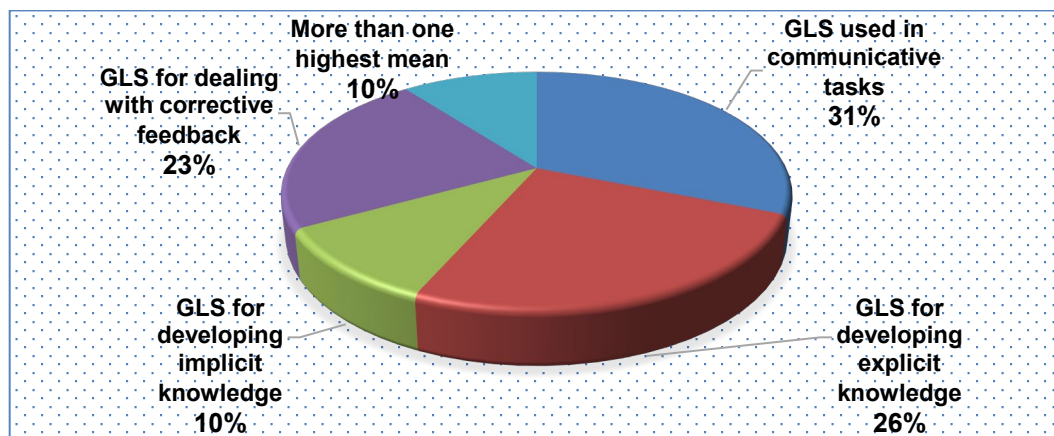


Fig. 3. Percentage of participants according to their reported mean in different types of Cognitive GLS

6 Conclusion

This study examines how university students use grammar learning strategies in their learning trajectories and analyses the relationships between this use and self-evaluated proficiency (language achievement), as well as the duration of their studies. There were three research questions (RQs) raised in this research. The first RQ examined the types and hierarchy of GLS employed by participating SFL students. This was addressed through a quantitative analysis of the frequency of GLS use among Indian students, followed by an in-depth qualitative discussion of the most commonly used GLS. The results showed that the most frequently used GLS are those dealing with corrective feedback ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.99$), followed closely by social GLS ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.98$). The least frequently used GLS were those used to develop implicit knowledge ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.89$) and affective GLS ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.90$). The second RQ was about the use of GLS and its relationship with self-reported grammar proficiency levels of the students learning SFL in Indian universities. The results show a clear difference in the mean between the higher proficient group and the lower one. A statistically significant difference in GLS usage (overall) and in all types of GLS except social GLS across the different self-reported grammar proficiency levels was found. The last RQ examined the correlation and variation between GLS use and study duration. No statistically significant differences were found among the groups in the use of any GLS category. However, second-year students used these strategies more frequently than their third- and first-year counterparts. The results indicate that Indian learners are keen to use GLS; however, they lack strategic training. Therefore, students need strategic learning and training in using GLS to demonstrate its effectiveness and efficiency in the learning process.

7 Implications and limitations

The findings of the present study have many educational implications and can help teachers and researchers in a foreign language classroom. The results showed that Indian students learning Spanish as foreign language use GLS frequently throughout their learning trajectory. However, there is a need to make these learners aware of how GLS can serve as a tool for effective and efficient language learning. Therefore, one of the implications of this study is to train students in the use of these GLS, both implicitly and explicitly. Another implication of the current study concerns the timely provision of corrective feedback. The GLS reported to be employed by the learners related to this aspect, as they expressed that they would like to be corrected when they made mistakes in

grammatical structures. Another important aspect arising from this study is metacognitive awareness. Indian learners need to develop this skill to reflect on their teaching and learning processes and to assess learning outcomes independently. This awareness will help determine whether they can achieve the learning outcomes defined in their curricular activities. The present study has certain methodological limitations. First, this is a cross-sectional study; a longitudinal study is recommended to complement it and provide a deeper understanding of these uses and the underlying factors that influence them. Second, this study is quantitative in nature and uses only one questionnaire (GLSI); a qualitative approach using techniques such as semi-structured interviews and observations could have complemented the results and strengthened the findings. The study was carried out with samples from three universities in the Indian context, and it is recommended that, in future, the sample size be increased to cover more higher education institutions.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

Questionnaire

The questionnaire aims to obtain information about the ways in which you go about learning Spanish grammar. Your responses will only be used for research purposes, so please be candid in your answers.

Below you will find statements about learning Spanish grammar. Please read each statement and choose the response on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates “It does not apply to me at all” and 5 “It perfectly describes my actions and thoughts”.

Metacognitive GLS

1. I preview the grammar structures to be covered in a lesson.
2. I pay attention to grammar structures when reading and listening.
3. I look for opportunities to practice grammar structures in many different ways. (e.g. outside classroom, chatting with natives etc).
4. I try to find more effective ways of learning grammar.
5. I know my strengths and weaknesses when it comes to grammar.
6. I have specific goals and objectives in learning grammar.
7. I pay attention to grammar structures in my own speaking and writing.

Cognitive strategies**GLS used to assist the production and comprehension of grammar in communication tasks**

8. I try to use specific grammar structures in communication (e.g., use of past tense in telling a story).
9. I read for pleasure and watch television, web series, YouTube etc. to improve my knowledge of grammar.
10. I notice (or remember) structures that cause me problems with meaning or communication.
11. I notice (or remember) structures that are repeated often in the text.
12. I pay attention to how more proficient people say things and then imitate.
13. I compare my speech and writing with that of more proficient people to see how I can improve.
14. I use Google or other search engines to see how a specific grammar structure is used in meaningful contexts.

GLS used to develop explicit knowledge of grammar

15. I pay attention to rules provided by the teacher or course book.
16. I try to understand every grammar rule.
17. I memorize rules about frequently used linguistic forms/structures (e.g., formation and use of the passive).
18. I memorize rules about how structures change their form (e.g., form an adjective to an adverb).
19. I paraphrase the rules I am given because I understand them better in my own words.
20. I use a notebook/note card for new rules and examples.
21. I group grammar structures to remember them better (verbs followed by gerund and infinitive).
22. I review grammar lessons to remember the rules better.
23. I use my mother tongue or other languages I know to understand and remember grammar rules.
24. I try to discover grammar rules by analysing examples.
25. I create my own hypotheses about how structures work and check these hypotheses.
26. I memorize whole phrases containing specific language forms.

GLS used to develop implicit knowledge of grammar

27. I repeat the rules and examples to myself or rewrite them many times.
28. I do many exercises to practice grammar (e.g., paraphrasing, translation, multiple-choice).
29. I try to apply new rules carefully and accurately in specific sentences (e.g., to compete a gap).
30. I try to use whole phrases containing specific structures in my speech.
31. I notice (or remember) a structure which, when I encounter it, causes me to do something, like check a box, choose a drawing or underline a structure.
32. I try to adjust the way I process spoken and written language in accordance with L2 spoken and written rules (e.g., in the case of some passive voice sentences).
33. I listen to and read texts containing many examples of a grammar structure.
34. I compare the way grammar is used in written and spoken language with how I use it.

GLS used to deal with corrective feedback on errors in the production of grammar

35. I listen carefully for any feedback the teacher gives me about the structures I use.
36. I pay attention to teacher correction when I do grammar exercises and try to repeat the correct version.
37. I try to notice and self-correct my mistakes when practicing grammar.
38. I try to negotiate grammar forms with the teacher when give a clue (e.g., a comment about the rule).
39. I notice when I am corrected on grammar in spontaneous communication (e.g., when giving opinions).
40. I try to notice how the correct version differs from my own and improve what I said.

Affective GLS

41. I try to relax when I have problems with understanding or using grammar structures.
42. I encourage myself to practice grammar when I know I have problems with a structure.
43. I try to use grammar structures even when I am not sure they are correct.
44. I give myself a reward when I do well on a grammar test.
45. I talk to other people about how I feel when learning grammar.

Social GLS

46. I ask the teacher to repeat or explain a grammar point if I do not understand.
47. I ask the teacher or more proficient learners to help me with grammar structures.

48. I like to be corrected when I make mistakes using grammar structures.
49. I practice grammar structures with other students.
50. I try to help others when they have problems with understanding or using grammar.