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## Language Learning Strategies Research in Colombia: A Review of the Last 10 Years

Investigación Sobre Estrategias de Aprendizaje de Idiomas en Colombia: Una Revisión de los Últimos 10 Años

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### Abstract

The concept of language learning strategies has been extensively examined to understand the cognitive processes and behaviors aimed at enhancing language performance and proficiency. The selection and instruction of learning strategies may vary due to contextual factors. Considering this, the objective of this literature review is to analyze the current trends in the field of language learning strategies specifically within the context of Colombia. The search methodology employed the keywords "language learning strategies" to identify empirical research conducted in Colombia, which was obtained from the SciELO, ERIC, and Redalyc databases. After the rigorous selection process, a shortlist of 13 relevant documents was compiled. The findings of this review reveal that learning strategies have been mainly explored using a qualitative lens with small sample sizes, which invites future studies to profit from valuable insights from mixed methods research designs. Additionally, further investigation is required to delve into the strategies employed by Colombian learners in different language skills and subsystems.


*Keywords:* language learning strategies, strategies-based instruction, systematic literature review, EFL, Colombia

### Resumen

Las estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas han sido ampliamente examinadas para comprender los procesos cognitivos y comportamientos para mejorar el rendimiento y la competencia lingüística. La selección y la instrucción de las estrategias de aprendizaje pueden variar debido a factores contextuales. Considerando esto, el objetivo de esta revisión de literatura es analizar las tendencias actuales en el campo de las estrategias de aprendizaje, específicamente en el contexto colombiano. La metodología de búsqueda empleó las palabras clave "estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas" para identificar investigaciones empíricas realizadas en Colombia, obtenidas de las bases de datos de SciELO, ERIC y Redalyc. Después de un riguroso proceso de selección, se compiló una lista de 13 documentos. Los hallazgos de esta revisión muestran que las estrategias de aprendizaje se han explorado principalmente desde una perspectiva cualitativa, con tamaños de muestra reducidos, lo que invita a futuras investigaciones a

aprovechar los beneficios de los enfoques mixtos. Además, se requiere una mayor investigación para indagar las estrategias empleadas por los estudiantes colombianos con respecto a diferentes habilidades y subsistemas del lenguaje.

*Palabras clave:* estrategias de aprendizaje, revisión sistemática de literatura, inglés como lengua extranjera, Colombia

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Language learning strategies (LLS) research emerged as the study of the various actions that learners take to regulate and control their learning, including their thoughts, behaviors, and decision-making processes to boost their language learning and achieve their learning goals. Rubin's (1975) pioneering study aimed to explore and understand the strategies "good language learners" used to acquire, develop, and improve their skills in a second or foreign language. The author described learning strategies as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (p. 43). The emerging concept of shifting the emphasis from teachers to learners and, more importantly, the aspiration to equip struggling learners with the tools utilized by proficient learners gained rapid popularity (Macaro, 2003; Oxford, 1990).

Researchers in the field of LLS have extensively examined various processes inherent to language learning, encompassing cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social dimensions. Notably, Oxford (1990) proposed a comprehensive taxonomy comprising six distinct types of learning strategies, namely memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, which has garnered wide recognition and prominence within the field due to its comprehensive nature, detailed organization, and direct applicability to language skills. Along with this organization of strategies, the author introduced the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), one of the most significant contributions for assessing learners' strategy use across the different domains outlined in her taxonomy. The incorporation of the SILL has significantly enhanced researchers' understanding of learners' strategic preferences, contexts of implementation, and related factors, thus providing valuable insights into the dynamics of strategy employment. According to Cohen and Weaver (2006), strategies can be categorized based on the specific language skill they pertain to, encompassing the receptive skills of listening and reading, as well as the productive skills of speaking and writing. Additionally, there are skill-related strategies that transcend all four skill areas, such as those associated with vocabulary acquisition and translation.

LLS research originated in applied linguistics and it is widely agreed that learners who employ a diverse range of strategies demonstrate a positive correlation with academic achievement, which appeals to educators exploring the characteristics of language learning; however, its definition has brought some controversy and calls for retheorization have been made, for example, suggesting the exploration of strategic behaviors under the concept of self-regulation (Dörnyei, 2005). Despite facing challenges and criticism, the field of LLS has reached maturity and has the potential to enhance our understanding of language learning through a balanced integration of existing empirical evidence and emerging theoretical perspectives (Griffiths, 2020; Pawlak, 2021).

Since the definition of LLS has been a concern, Griffiths and Cansiz (2015) suggested that "Language learning strategies are actions chosen (either deliberately or automatically) for the purpose of learning or regulating the learning of language" (p. 476). The authors argued that "successful strategy use may be related to a complex amalgamation of how many strategies are employed, how often, and how well they are orchestrated" (p. 479). They highlighted some important elements of LLS, such as being active, deliberate and automatic, chosen, and goal-oriented. Another key aspect of LLS is their teachability. Learners' strategy use and language proficiency are commonly affected by the design and implementation of effective strategy training programs; thus, emphasis has been made on the benefits of scaffolding and gradually transferring responsibility to learners (Griffiths, 2018).

More recently, Rebecca Oxford (2017) suggested a comprehensive definition of LLS, where the author covered the insights of linguists and researchers in the field of strategic behaviors toward language learning:

L2 learning strategies are complex, dynamic thoughts and actions, selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, emotional, and social) for the purpose of (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency. Strategies are mentally guided but may also have physical and therefore observable manifestations. Learners often use strategies flexibly and creatively; combine them in various ways, such as strategy clusters or strategy chains; and orchestrate them to meet learning needs. Strategies are teachable. Learners in their contexts decide which strategies to use. Appropriateness of strategies depends on multiple personal and contextual factors. (p. 48)

LLS research plays a pivotal role in shaping language teaching practices and curriculum design. The suitability of strategies is contingent upon a range of contextual factors, and both educators and learners possess the autonomy to determine which strategies to employ. In light of these considerations, the exploration of strategic learning within the Colombian context is highly justified, as it has the potential to illuminate the unique approaches adopted by Colombian learners and educators in their language acquisition journey. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

- To find out the general research trends and methodologies on language learning strategies in Colombia.
- To identify the main findings, implications, and possible gaps of investigations regarding LLS research in the Colombian context.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This literature review aimed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the key characteristics and contributions of LLS research conducted in Colombia, published in the ERIC, Redalyc, and SciELO databases to ensure a thorough exploration of the subject matter. The search strategy involved using the keywords “language learning strategies” to identify relevant documents reporting on LLS research published in academic journals. Initially, the search was expanded by including the words AND Colombia to increase specificity; however, it was found that this approach led to the omission of several records related to research conducted in Colombia and resulted in a high number of “false positives” (e.g., studies published in Colombian journals but conducted in other countries). Therefore, a manual review was necessary to accurately identify research conducted within the Colombian context. For inclusion of documents in this review, a ten-year time frame was considered to focus on the most recent investigations in the field. The selected documents met the following criteria and were analyzed:

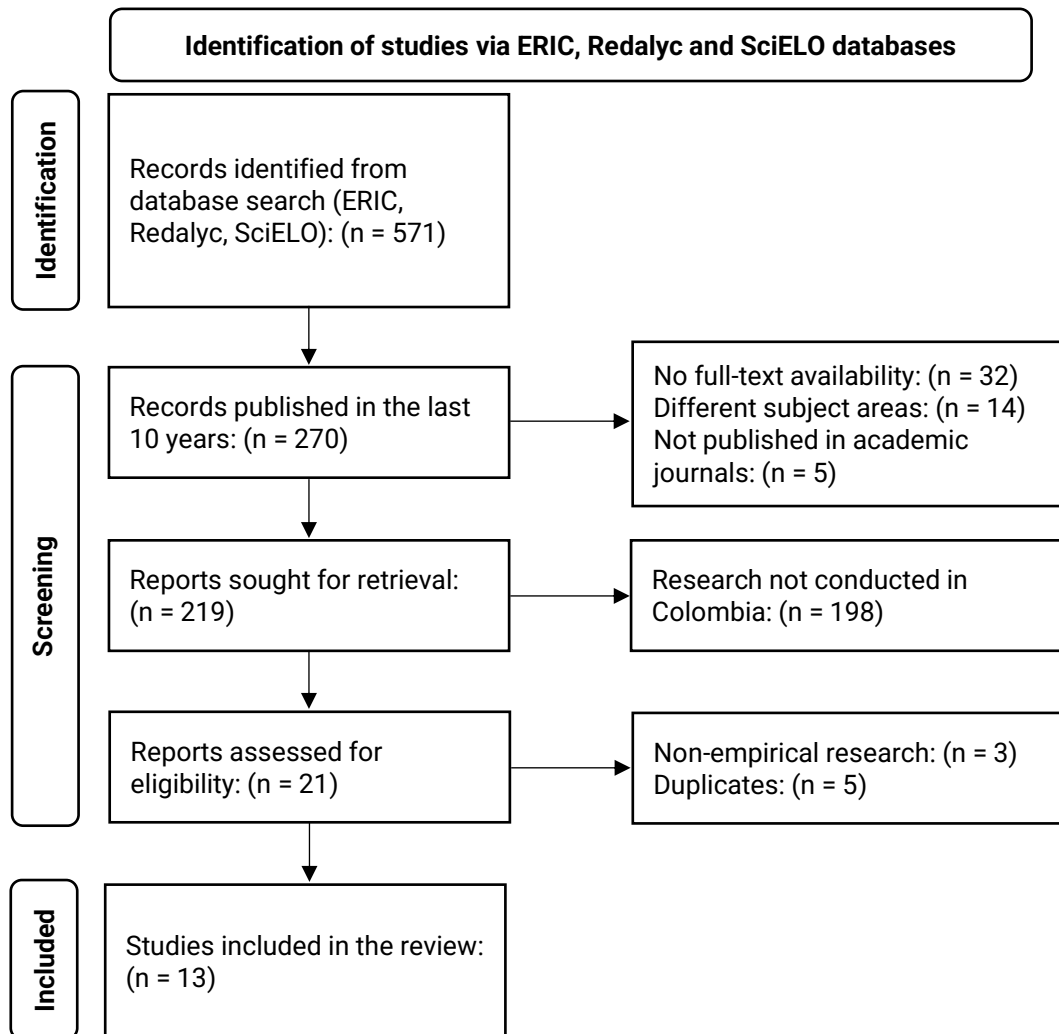
- Have full-text availability.
- Be published in academic journals available through the eric, redalyc, and scielo databases.
- Mention the construct language learning strategies or related types of strategies in titles or keywords.
- Refer to empirical research conducted in colombia.

In this study, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) diagram was followed as a quality indicator to guide the systematic literature review (Chapman, 2021). Initially, the search yielded a total of 571 internationally published documents. Subsequently, this sample was reduced to 270 reports published within the last ten years. Due to the varying options to refine the search provided by the three databases, priority was given to articles published in academic journals directly accessible via the databases, focusing on specific subject areas such as education, linguistics, language, and social sciences during the screening phase. Thus, a total of 219 documents were retrieved and titles and abstracts were read to

identify investigations conducted in the Colombian context, which allowed the exclusion of 198 inquiries held in other countries. Finally, duplicates published simultaneously in the three databases were removed. The selection process and the generation of the shortlist of 13 articles for this review are depicted in Figure 1, following the PRISMA diagram.

**Figure 1**

*PRISMA Diagram of Reports Included in the Review*



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this investigation, a selection of 13 articles published in the last ten years, focusing on empirical research conducted in Colombia, was compiled. The primary aim of this small-scale inquiry was to discern the prevailing patterns and tendencies within the domain of LLS research in Colombia. Based on the established research objectives, this review encompasses two principal facets: (1) it entails an examination of the overarching research patterns about LLS in Colombia; and (2) it aims to elucidate the principal findings, implications, and potential research gaps concerning investigations on LLS within the specific context of Colombia. The main characteristics of the 13 articles identified in this research are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Simplified table of studies included in the systematic review*

No.	Study	Participants	Methods	Type of strategies
1	(Sisquiarco et al., 2018)	8 female 6th grade students	Action research	Instruction of cognitive and metacognitive strategies
2	(Guapacha Chamorro & Benavidez Paz, 2017)	33 first-year pre-service language teachers	Action research	Exploration of social, affective, metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, and memory strategies
3	(Abad & Alzate, 2016)	26 undergraduate students	Action research	Speaking strategies
4	(Peñuela, 2018)	10 adults in an advanced English course at a private language center	Action research	Instruction of metacognitive strategies (overviewing, goal setting, and self-evaluating)
5	(Pérez & Alvira, 2017)	12 eleventh graders	Action research	Instruction of memory strategies (word cards, association with pictures, and association with a topic)
6	(Trujillo Becerra et al., 2015)	41 high school students	Action research	Instruction of metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluating)
7	(Álvarez Ayure et al., 2018)	30 eighth graders of two public schools	Grounded theory	Instruction of metacognitive and vocabulary strategies
8	(Gómez et al., 2021)	303 undergraduates	Quantitative	Exploration of social, affective, metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, and memory strategies
9	(Díaz, 2015)	10 primary school students	Qualitative	Instruction of metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluating)
10	(Toro Criollo & Ramírez Toro, 2019)	A group of eleventh graders	Action research	Instruction of reading strategies
11	(Villalba Ramos, 2022)	1 visually-impaired learner	Qualitative (case study)	Identification of social, affective, metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, and memory strategies
12	(Bautista Barón, 2013)	16 male students	Action research	Instruction of reading strategies
13	(Padilla De La Cerda, 2016)	35 ninth graders at a public school	Action research	Instruction of reading strategies

### **Trends on LLS research in Colombia**

Most studies included in this review were held using the action research methodology (N=9), an approach that allows researchers and educators to address specific practical problems or improve practices within particular contexts. In an investigation conducted by Sisquiarco et al.

(2018), the influence of strategies-based feedback on the oral performance of sixth-grade students was examined. The findings revealed that when educators imparted precise instructions pertaining to metacognitive and cognitive strategies, accompanied by feedback that emphasized the utilization of these strategies, a notable enhancement in students' autonomy, confidence, and aptitude in oral presentations was observed. This inquiry was conducted within the school context, focusing on a sample of eight students. Guapacha Chamorro and Benavidez Paz (2017) conducted a study that assessed the efficacy of explicit strategy instruction in augmenting the English proficiency of pre-service teachers, with a specific emphasis on spoken and written communication, grammatical competence, and vocabulary acquisition. This investigation employed an integration of the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) models to enrich the pedagogical repertoire of educators. As a further example, Trujillo Becerra et al. (2015) undertook an investigation to examine the potential effectiveness of incorporating training in three metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluating) through the utilization of learning journals. The aim was to enhance the vocabulary learning of a group consisting of 41 high school students. The findings indicated that the training facilitated the participants in cultivating metacognitive awareness concerning their vocabulary acquisition process, ultimately contributing to the development of their lexical competence.

LLS have been explored with the use of qualitative research designs. As an illustrative case, Diaz (2015) investigated the impact of metacognitive strategies on the vocabulary expansion and retention of 10 primary school students in their initial stages of language acquisition. The findings indicated that the implementation of metacognitive strategy training yielded positive outcomes in terms of enhancing participants' vocabulary acquisition skills. Specifically, the training facilitated increased awareness of various learning strategies and the effective utilization of metacognitive strategies to augment vocabulary learning. Additionally, the study revealed that the employed LLS exerted a positive influence on students' vocabulary development by enabling them to explore diverse approaches for comprehending and interpreting the meaning of words presented during the instructional interventions. Álvarez Ayure et al. (2018) used grounded theory to investigate the impact of metacognitive and vocabulary learning strategies on the performance of 30 eighth-grade students in a vocabulary learning task and their levels of learning autonomy. The findings revealed notable enhancements in the proportion of students employing learning strategies, the adoption of metacognitive behaviors, and their levels of autonomy. The study also underscored the significance of teacher guidance in facilitating students' exploration of strategies and fostering reflective thinking about effective learning approaches, which, in turn, heightened the likelihood of student autonomy and learning outcomes. Furthermore, in a case study, Villalba (2022) sought to investigate the English language acquisition process of a visually impaired student (VIS) within the virtual learning environment of a Colombian public university. The study documented the utilization and effectiveness of a blend of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies employed by the VIS to enhance performance in learning English.

One study included in this literature review adopted a purely quantitative approach. Gómez et al. (2021) aimed to establish the correlation between LLS and beliefs about language learning among 303 undergraduate participants. The researchers employed Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) as assessment tools. The findings revealed a higher prevalence of social strategies and identified gender differences in the utilization of memory strategies. The authors posited that variables, such as age, sociocultural factors, prior experiences, self-concept, and autonomy, among others, might exert an influence on both learning strategies and beliefs about learning English. In this regard, more research using quantitative designs is needed to explore the effectiveness of LLS interventions (in the case of experimental research). Likewise, more non-

intervention research can provide insights into how LLS relate to variables, such as gender, age, grade level, learning styles, and motivation to learn English.

The aforementioned studies have predominantly enriched the understanding of LLS through a qualitative perspective. The utilization of diverse data collection and analysis methods, including interviews, focus groups, field notes, and observations, has been prevalent, aligning with the objective of comprehending the problem at hand, evaluating the impact of interventions, and reflecting on pedagogical practices. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these studies often relied on relatively small sample sizes, typically ranging from 1 to 40 students, which presents challenges in terms of the generalizability of the findings. In this respect, the adoption of a mixed methods research approach is advised to facilitate the integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, thereby enabling a comprehensive exploration of a research problem (Pawlak & Oxford, 2018). By collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data, a more robust and generalizable depiction of LLS within the Colombian context can be attained, facilitating the generation of knowledge and enriching the existing literature, as suggested by other literature reviews (Hajar, 2019; Wang, 2020).

### **Findings, implications, and future directions of LLS research**

Overall, the studies included in this review reported positive outcomes regarding the exploration of LLS in Colombia. There are calls for broader integration of strategy training within language teaching curricula. Classroom practices should encompass an increased emphasis on strategy instruction to empower students with enhanced learning control and foster the acquisition of skills that can be transferred to diverse learning contexts. Toro Criollo and Ramírez Toro (2019) argued that the strategies utilized by students in an additional course, such as a research intervention, should also be integrated into their regular class time. According to Trujillo Becerra et al. (2015), teachers should ensure ample opportunities for students to practice and apply these strategies, while also providing explicit guidance on their effective utilization across various contexts. The authors claimed that the integration of metacognitive and vocabulary strategies training within language classrooms is crucial for fostering greater student autonomy in learning and facilitating the transferability of these strategies to diverse domains of knowledge, which agrees with Gómez et al.'s (2021) advice. There is a need to provide training to both teachers and learners in strategies intended to facilitate the teaching and learning of vocabulary, which underscores the importance of the integration of these strategies into the English language program of educational institutions (Pérez & Alvira, 2017).

LLS instruction is positively associated with strategies awareness use. In a study investigating the influence of LLS instruction on students' selection and utilization of strategies for oral exam preparation, the findings suggested a significant relationship between students' awareness of strategies and the quality of instruction provided by teachers. This association subsequently influenced students' use of strategies (Abad & Alzate, 2016). Furthermore, according to the findings reported by Bautista Barón (2013), a group of 16 undergraduate students of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) demonstrated enhanced awareness of the relevance and suitability of various strategies in different tasks, which boosted their reading comprehension. This improvement was achieved through their deliberate selection and implementation of learning strategies, coupled with self-evaluation of their progress. Díaz (2015) also observed comparable outcomes, as participants exhibited heightened awareness of targeted learning strategies, with a particular emphasis on the application of metacognitive strategies, to enhance their vocabulary acquisition. Peñuela (2018) similarly documented a positive correlation, whereby the utilization of three metacognitive strategies (overviewing, goal setting, and self-evaluating) positively influenced the awareness of stress and intonation among a group of 10 advanced English learners.

Studies conducted in Colombia advise future research to devote enough time to LLS training. Enough time devoted to the inclusion of LLS instruction in language curricula, strategy awareness, and strategy training is needed. For strategies-based feedback to be maximally effective, it is essential to precede it with explicit instruction on the nature of learning strategies and their practical application, as indicated by Sisquiarco et al. (2018). Consequently, sufficient time and training are necessary to enable students to internalize and employ these learning strategies, as well as to equip teachers with the skills to successfully provide strategies-based feedback. Diaz (2015) advised extending the duration of the training period in order to further support participants' ongoing self-evaluation process. Moreover, to ensure the effectiveness of strategies, it is recommended to select a smaller number of strategies and dedicate a longer duration of time to their implementation for the thorough examination of their efficacy and the assessment of learners' language improvement (Guapacha Chamorro & Benavidez Paz, 2017).

Although the exploration of LLS in Colombia has been applied across diverse educational settings, more exploration might be needed. Most studies analyzed in this review were conducted in traditional settings (face-to-face courses at school or higher education); however, some studies placed a great emphasis on training and exploring learning strategies through the utilization of information and communications technology. Álvarez Ayure et al. (2018) conducted a study that demonstrated how students who actively engaged in metacognitive strategies outside the classroom, particularly through the use of a WebQuest, experienced an improvement in their ability to employ strategies that specifically support vocabulary learning about particular topics. In another investigation conducted by Villalba (2022), the English language learning progress of a visually impaired student (VIS) within virtual environments at a Colombian university was examined. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the incorporation of technology into language instruction has the potential to expand strategic learning opportunities for learners in Colombia; consequently, further exploration and integration into language teaching methodologies should be considered.

Some specific domains of LLS have been explored in Colombia. Some studies have concentrated on investigating different types of strategies, such as metacognitive strategies (Álvarez Ayure et al., 2018; Diaz, 2015; Peñuela, 2018; Sisquiarco et al., 2018; Trujillo Becerra et al., 2015), and memory strategies (Pérez & Alvira, 2017). In some cases, special emphasis has been put on language skills or subsystems, for instance, reading (Bautista Barón, 2013; Padilla De La Cerda, 2016; Toro Criollo & Ramírez Toro, 2019), vocabulary (Álvarez Ayure et al., 2018; Diaz, 2015; Pérez & Alvira, 2017; Trujillo Becerra et al., 2015), and speaking (Abad & Alzate, 2016; Peñuela, 2018; Sisquiarco et al., 2018). A promising path to advance the exploration of LLS in Colombia is to study the specific domains where they are applied, which, in turn, will provide a more generalized outlook of LLS. This targeted investigation allows for a deeper understanding of how strategies are utilized in distinct contexts, such as academic settings, workplace environments, or specific language skills that might not have received enough attention (e.g., listening, writing). By exploring LLS within these specific areas, researchers can uncover nuanced insights into the strategies employed, their effectiveness, and their impact on language learning outcomes (Pawlak & Oxford, 2018). This domain-specific investigation boosts our understanding of the practical application of LLS and provides valuable guidance for educators, curriculum designers, and language learners in those domains.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study sought to take stock of what the field of LLS has accomplished in the Colombian context, which has favored the promotion of a variety of strategies, such as cognitive, metacognitive, and memory strategies. There is an urgent demand for further investigations aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of various strategies and their suitability for enhancing

language proficiency. These investigations can be conducted in diverse settings with the employment of technology, thus expanding the time frame of strategies-based instruction. Additionally, it is imperative to delve into the impact of social and cultural factors on the utilization of strategies, as well as to explore potential variations among learner groups based on age, gender, and educational level. Addressing the research gap concerning the role of teachers in fostering and supporting strategic learning, as well as their perceptions and understanding of LLS within the Colombian context, is of great importance. Examining the possible relations between students' self-reported use of LLS and teachers' reported instruction of LLS can provide valuable insights into learning strategies, thus enriching the field of language learning. Furthermore, the incorporation of mixed methods designs in research on learning strategies in the Colombian context can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of learners' utilization of strategies.

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