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From Strategy to Fluency: EFL Learners' Preferences for Cognitive Learning Strategies to Overcome Psychological and Linguistic Challenges in Speaking

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Abstract

English as an international language is vital for EFL learners, especially in developing speaking skill. Many Indonesian students struggle with speaking due to linguistic limitations (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and non-linguistic barriers (anxiety, low motivation, lack of confidence). The 2024 English Proficiency Index categorizes Indonesia as “Low,” highlighting the urgency of effective learning strategies. This study aimed to identify the cognitive strategies most frequently used by English Education students at IGM University and examine their relation to speaking proficiency. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, supported by simple descriptive statistics from an open-ended questionnaire that completed by 76 students across different semesters, and an in-depth semi-structured interview with nine participants. Analysis using an interactive model and thematic approach revealed three dominant strategies: repetition and practice, problem-solving and transfer, and elaboration and integration. Students who use more cognitive learning strategies tend to show greater confidence and stronger vocabulary mastery, while users of the least strategies prefer a more reflective individual approach. Both groups preferred interactive activities such as role-play and group discussions. The study recommends adaptive, personality-sensitive teaching methods and encourages learners to explore diverse strategies consistently. These findings contribute to more inclusive and effective approaches to English-speaking instruction.

Keywords: Cognitive learning strategies, English speaking skill, EFL learners, Adaptive learning, English education..

Introduction

In today's globalized era, English proficiency is increasingly required in education, professional communication, and international collaboration. Yet in many EFL contexts, particularly Indonesia, speaking skill remains a persistent challenge. The 2024 English Proficiency Index (EPI) ranked Indonesia in the "low proficiency" category, showing a decline in its global standing (English education First, 2024). This indicates that although English is widely taught, learners' oral proficiency still falls short of expectations. In practice, many students struggle to express their ideas fluently in English, whether in academic discussions or informal conversations. Common issues include speech anxiety, limited vocabulary, and reliance on the mother tongue, all of which can hinder their communicative competence (Audina Pratiwi & Mirizon, 2018; Jaya et al., 2022). As a result, learners are unable to take full advantage of speaking opportunities, which reduces their competitiveness in both academic and professional contexts.

From this real-life problem emerges the research problem. Previous research has highlighted a range of barriers that EFL learners face when speaking, notably psychological factors such as anxiety and a lack of confidence (Chen, 2023; Yessenbekova, 2024), linguistic issues like poor pronunciation and limited vocabulary (Islam et al., 2022; Jiang & Phusawisot, 2023), and contextual constraints such as limited exposure to authentic English use (Shen & Chiu, 2019). Indonesian learners in particular face additional difficulties: the dominance of local languages, unengaging teaching methods, and insufficient communicative practice (Hidayat & Soviana Devi, 2024; Winnie et al., 2023). These findings suggest that while speaking is prioritized in EFL instruction, the strategies used by learners to overcome these difficulties remain inconsistent, with many still struggling to develop effective approaches.

To address these challenges, researchers have emphasized the importance of learning strategies in enhancing language acquisition. For instance, Yoong & Hashim (2023) reported that learners who actively applied cognitive strategies improved their fluency and confidence in speaking. Similarly, Tahmina (2023) found that cognitive strategies such as repetition, summarizing, and elaboration enabled learners to better process input and perform more effectively in oral communication. Yet, most existing research has tended to focus on broader categories of strategies; metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, rather than on the specific cognitive strategies that directly influence how learners practice and internalize spoken language (Chelvia & Novita Sari, 2025; Ni'mah et al., 2025). This leaves a gap in understanding how EFL learners, particularly in Indonesia, employ cognitive strategies when speaking English.

Theoretically, Oxford (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) classification highlight cognitive strategies as core techniques involving repetition, summarizing, elaboration, translation, and problem-solving. To provide a clearer picture, these strategies are outlined in Table 1, which synthesizes established frameworks of cognitive learning strategies (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Piaget, 1952; Sreena & Ilankumaran, 2019).

Table 1. Cognitive strategy framework

No	Cognitive Strategy	Simple Description	Experts
1	Repetition & Practice	Repeat the material or exercise repeatedly to strengthen memory.	Oxford (1990), Sreena (2019)
2	Note-taking & Summarizing	Record and summarize important information to understand the content of the material.	O'Malley & Chamot (1990)
3	Elaboration & Integration	Relate new information to existing knowledge.	Weinstein & Mayer (1986), Mayer (2001)
4	Visualization / Imagery	Imagining or visualizing concepts to clarify understanding.	Mayer (2001), Sreena (2019)

5	Inference & Deduction	Infer or guess meaning based on context or logic.	Oxford (1990), Piaget (1952)
6	Organizing & Grouping	Organize and group information to make it more structured and easier to remember.	Oxford (1990), Weinstein & Mayer (1986)
7	Translation & Resourcing	Translating materials and using additional resources such as dictionaries or notes.	Oxford (1990), O'Malley & Chamot (1990)
8	Problem-solving & Transfer	Apply knowledge in new situations and solve problems logically.	Piaget (1952), Oxford (1990)

These strategies directly shape learners' ability to process and produce language, enhancing their fluency, accuracy, and confidence in speaking (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Yoong & Hashim, 2023). In line with this framework, the present study investigates the types of cognitive strategies most frequently employed by English Education students at Universitas Indo Global Mandiri (UIGM) in developing their speaking skills. The study not only to identify learners' preferred strategies but also to explore their potential role in addressing psychological and linguistic challenges in EFL speaking.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate cognitive learning strategies among English Education students at Universitas Indo Global Mandiri (UIGM), Palembang, during June–July 2025. A total of 76 students from the second, fourth, and sixth semesters participated, selected purposively based on their engagement in speaking courses relevant to the study objectives. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires consisting eight questions based on cognitive strategy framework to explored students' reported use of cognitive strategies, while the interviews, consisting of fourteen guiding questions, focused on themes

such as motivations, challenges, and reasoning in strategy use. From the questionnaire results, nine students were purposively selected to represent varying levels of strategy use (high, moderate, and low) to provide a diverse range of perspectives, guided by established cognitive learning theory frameworks (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Piaget, 1952; Sreena & Ilankumaran, 2019).

Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis and Miles et al. (2014) interactive model of data analysis was applied to interpret the findings. To ensure trustworthiness, the study used criteria from Lincoln et al. (1985), including triangulation, member checking, detailed descriptions for transferability, systematic documentation for dependability, and reflective notes for confirmability. This methodological approach enabled the identification of dominant cognitive strategies in students' speaking skills development, highlighting both their frequency and underlying reasons, and thus providing a comprehensive understanding of learners' cognitive practices.

Results

The results are based on data collected through open-ended questionnaires administered to 76 English Education students across the second, fourth, and sixth semesters, as well as semi-structured interviews with nine purposively selected participants. The questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to identify frequencies and percentages of reported strategy use, while interview transcripts were thematically coded to capture learners' explanations, motivations, and challenges in applying cognitive strategies. Findings from both instruments were then compared to provide a comprehensive picture of students' strategic preferences in speaking.

Dominant Strategies

Table 2 presents the distribution of dominant strategies based on the questionnaire results. As seen in the table, problem-solving & transfer achieved the highest frequency, followed by repetition and practice, then elaboration & integration strategies.

Table 2. Dominant cognitive learning strategies from questionnaire result

Cognitive Strategy	Questionnaire (N=76)	Total (percentage)
Problem-solving & Transfer	74 students	93,7%
Repetition & Practice	72 students	94,7%
Elaboration & Integration	71 students	93,4%

This finding suggests that students rely heavily on strategies that provide immediate communicative support, such as simplifying expressions or practicing repeatedly, rather than on strategies that require long-term planning. Tendencies of using problem-solving and transfer strategies were dominant because problem-solving and transfer refer to learners' ability to substitute unknown vocabulary with simpler words or connect new expressions to prior knowledge. Repetition & practice used to improve students' speaking skill. Elaboration and integration involved linking new language input with grammar rules, classroom materials, or personal experiences, which facilitated better recall and meaningful communication.

Frequency of Strategies

To cross-validate these findings, Table 3 combines questionnaire and interview results. As shown in table 3, the data confirm that repetition and practice, problem-solving and transfer, and elaboration and integration consistently emerged as the most preferred strategies across both instruments.

Table 3. The most frequently used strategy by students from both instrument

Cognitive Strategy	Questionnaire (N=76)	Interview (N=9)	Total (Combined)
Repetition & Practice	72 students	9 students	81 (95,3%)
Problem-solving & Transfer	74 students	3 students	77 (90,5%)
Elaboration & Integration	71 students	4 students	75 (88,2%)

Interestingly, while problem-solving and transfer appeared most frequently in the questionnaire, repetition and practice emerged as more strongly emphasized in the interviews, showing that students may perceive different strategies as dominant depending on context. Out of nine participants, all respondent emphasized the role of repetition & practice in building fluency, three mentioned problem-solving & transfer, and four respondents said they used elaboration and integration. These findings highlight that while all three strategies are widely used, repetition & practice remained the most dominant and frequently used by students, both in breadth (across the larger student sample) and in depth (as expressed in the interviews).

The findings were consistent across instruments, showing that repetition and practice, problem-solving and transfer, and elaboration were the most prominent strategies. Many participants emphasized that repeating phrases and practicing with peers or mirrors helped them gain confidence and fluency. Similarly, problem-solving enabled learners to connect new expressions with prior knowledge, while elaboration supported deeper processing of language input.

Beyond these dominant patterns, the interview data also revealed that individual and contextual factors shaped how learners applied strategies. Personality traits played a role: extroverted students engaged more confidently in practice-oriented strategies such as repetition and improvisation, whereas introverted students preferred individual and reflective approaches like note-taking and visualization, although they still

relied on repetition and practice. As one student explained, “I practice and repeat simple words in front of the mirror, so from the simple words into sentences. I do this until fluent (R5. June 28th, 2025)”

Moreover, role play was identified as a favourite classroom activity, as it provided a supportive environment where students could experiment with language, integrate multiple strategies, and reduce speaking anxiety. These findings suggest that cognitive strategies are not employed in isolation, but are mediated by learner characteristics and instructional design.

Discussion

This study provides evidence that cognitive learning strategies play a pivotal role in the development of speaking skills among English education students. The findings from both instrument (as shown in table 3 above) indicate that repetition and practice (95.3%), problem-solving and transfer (90.6%), and elaboration and integration (88.2%) were the most dominant strategies. Their consistent appearance across data sources underlines their centrality in supporting learners’ fluency and confidence.

This study confirms and extends earlier research. Yoong & Hashim (2023) and Tahmina (2023) emphasized the importance of cognitive strategies in developing oral fluency and confidence, and the present findings provide further empirical support. In line with Revelo Trujillo & Ramírez Román (2024), repetition supports the automatization of language production. The students in this study also relied on repetition not only to internalize new structures but also to reduce anxiety and manage real-time speaking pressure. Similarly, the prominence of problem-solving and transfer resonates with Jiang & Phusawisot (2023) conclusion that adaptive strategies help learners sustain communication despite linguistic gaps. However, this study offers a new nuance: rather than being a secondary resource, problem-solving was often used as a primary tool for improvisation in classroom interactions.

Elaboration and integration also played a significant role. While Weinstein & Mayer (1986) originally conceptualized elaboration as a process to support long-term memory retention, the present results highlight its communicative value. Students integrated classroom input with prior knowledge and personal experiences, making tasks more relevant and engaging. This finding aligns with Permana's (2025) study of communicative language teaching (CLT), which in line with the cognitive strategy of elaboration & integration, not only enhances retention but also adapts learning to diverse styles, supports critical thinking, and strengthens the communicative purpose of speaking tasks.

Less dominant strategies, including note-taking, visualization, and translation, were still used by participants but were not prioritized compared to oral rehearsal and improvisation. This partially contrasts with findings by Chelvia & Novita Sari (2025) and Ni'mah et al. (2025), who reported that note-taking and visualization were relatively more central in learners' strategy repertoires. Such variation may reflect cultural and institutional contexts: in Indonesian classrooms, oral rehearsal and improvisation are more heavily emphasized than reflective strategies, indicating that strategy preferences are shaped by local pedagogical traditions and classroom practices. These differences not only underscore the contextual factors influencing learners' choices but also provide valuable implications for classroom instruction.

Building on these insights, several practical recommendations can be proposed for EFL instruction. First, teachers should prioritize repetitive oral practice and improvisational tasks, such as short impromptu dialogues, to build fluency and reduce hesitation (Kemalovna & Jumamyrovna, 2025). Second, integrating role-play and group-based speaking tasks, such as problem-solving scenarios or peer debates, can foster collaborative learning, encourage adaptive strategies, and create a less threatening environment

that helps reduce speaking anxiety (Wijaya et al., 2024) Third, elaboration and integration should be fostered by designing activities where students connect classroom materials to their own experiences, for example, through reflective journals or presentations that link new vocabulary to real-life contexts (Vaghela & Parsana, 2024). Finally, reflective strategies such as note-taking and visualization should not be neglected, particularly for introverted learners, who may benefit from structured preparation activities (e.g., guided self-reflection sheets or mind mapping) before participating in oral tasks (Kuning & Prihatmojo, 2025).

Beyond the immediate applications, the findings also point to several extended pedagogical implications for EFL instruction. Adopting a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach can integrate repetition, problem-solving, and elaboration into meaningful communicative activities, such as information-gap tasks or collaborative problem-solving projects, which balance structured practice with authentic interaction (Ng et al., 2025). Also, given the variation in learners' preferences (e.g., extroverted learners favoring improvisation while introverted learners rely on reflective strategies), teachers may implement personalized strategy training to help students recognize and optimize their individual strengths (Bouchareb, 2024). Then, technology-enhanced practice can expand opportunities for oral rehearsal through digital tools such as voice-recording applications, online speaking platforms, or AI-based conversation partners, thereby extending practice beyond the classroom (Lai & Lee, 2024). Scaffolding techniques should be employed to manage speaking anxiety, building confidence and reducing nervousness (Pinela Bajaanã et al., 2025) for instance by sequencing low-stakes tasks (e.g., pair dialogues) before progressing to higher-stakes performances (e.g., group presentations). The last, incorporating peer feedback and guided reflection can encourage students to critically evaluate their strategic choices, fostering metacognitive awareness and deeper engagement with speaking tasks (Setiawan et al.,

2025). Collectively, these recommendations strengthen the applicability of cognitive strategies in diverse instructional settings, ensuring that speaking pedagogy not only enhances fluency and confidence but also adapts to learners' psychological needs and evolving classroom realities.

Taken together, these findings not only reinforce but also refine the established understanding of cognitive strategy use in EFL speaking. By demonstrating that repetition, problem-solving, and elaboration are not only common but interdependent, this study adds depth to the ongoing scholarly dialogue. The contribution lies in showing that students' strategic choices are shaped by both psychological needs (reducing anxiety, sustaining communication) and instructional contexts (speaking-focused tasks). Thus, this research positions itself as both supportive of and complementary to existing literature, while offering a nuanced understanding of how cognitive strategies are mobilized in the specific setting of Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the urgent need to strengthen students' speaking competence in EFL contexts can be effectively addressed through the use of cognitive learning strategies. The findings show that repetition and practice, problem-solving and transfer, and elaboration and integration are the most salient strategies, proved to be the most influential in reducing anxiety, sustaining communication, and integrating knowledge meaningfully into interaction. The consequence of this result is that without adequate attention to these strategies, learners may continue to struggle with fluency, confidence, and communicative effectiveness. Conversely, when systematically incorporated into instruction, these strategies can accelerate speaking development and foster long-term communicative competence.

The contribution of this research lies in clarifying that cognitive strategies are not merely supportive techniques but essential mechanisms for achieving oral fluency. This finding highlights the importance for teachers to design speaking activities that foster rehearsal, improvisation, and meaningful integration. By doing so, learners are better equipped with adaptive tools to overcome psychological and linguistic barriers.

At the same time, the study positions itself within the broader scholarly dialogue by confirming prior findings while offering a contextual nuance: strategy use is highly shaped by learners' immediate instructional environment. Future research may further explore how cognitive strategies interact with affective and social dimensions of learning, thereby deepening our understanding of how speaking competence develops in diverse EFL settings.

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