

Investigating Gender-Based Differences in EFL Learning Strategies in Secondary Schools in Kaziba/Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

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Abstract

This study has investigated the language learning strategies employed by male and female students during the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary schools in the Kaziba region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The research employed Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) within a quantitative framework to analyze the strategic differences between male and female students during their EFL learning journey. A total of 264 students participated in the study, which involved the administration of a validated survey that had been adapted to align with regional linguistic conventions. The study examined the utilization of direct strategies, encompassing memory and cognitive methods, as well as compensation strategies. Additionally, indirect strategies were considered, including metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The findings indicate that both male and female students employ language learning strategies at a moderate level, though they exhibit distinct patterns of strategy utilization. The data revealed that female students preferred to learn through organized methods that involve social interaction. Male students demonstrated a clear preference for compensation and metacognitive strategies which

suggests that they depend more on self-regulation and adaptive communication techniques. The analysis did not reveal any meaningful differences between male and female students when looking at direct and indirect strategy usage. This demonstrates how gender influences strategy choices while considering the effects of irregular attendance along with classroom procedures and social standards. Educational methods should incorporate gender-sensitive approaches to meet diverse learning requirements and foster student participation across all groups. The implementation of teaching methods that match student strategic preferences enables fragile educational settings to provide equal and successful EFL acquisition opportunities. The research demands specific teacher education programs together with policy changes to reduce gender inequalities in language learning achievements.

Keywords: Differences, Gender, Learning strategies, Language learning.

1. Introduction

This research has investigated gender-based differences in the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Kaziba secondary schools in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The rationale for this assertion is twofold: first, language is recognized as a significant instrument of communication among individuals from diverse communities (Crystal, 2003); second, it is a recognized means of communication between individuals from different communities. The estimated number of languages spoken worldwide ranges from 6,000 to 7,000, with some facing the threat of endangerment and extinction (Eberhard et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Given the proliferation of languages worldwide, as well as the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence among nations, economies, and cultures, there is an escalating demand for effective communication and the establishment of linguistic connections on a global scale (Graddol, 2006). The advent of globalization has precipitated an augmentation in the demand and necessity for integration, interconnectedness, and communication. This phenomenon underscores the paramount importance of acquiring foreign languages as a means of facilitating communication with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Council of Europe, 2018). In the context of the myriad languages that exist globally, English has emerged as a prominent global language (Sumarni & Noor, 2019). This phenomenon can be attributed to a confluence of historical, economic, technological, cultural, and educational factors, as well as its historical colonial legacy and its current economic power. Its capacity for imparting knowledge has been demonstrated to enhance employability and educational prospects in the current era, thereby conferring upon it a distinct advantage over other languages (Graddol, 2006). Nonetheless, the acquisition of English as a foreign language remains a challenging endeavor, influenced by numerous factors, including motivation, attitude, language learning strategies, and personality types, among others (Oxford, 1990; Sayedi, 2020).

The learning of English as a foreign language is confronted by numerous challenges, including the learners' native language and learning environment (Ellis, 1994). In conflict-affected and resource-poor settings, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), these challenges include the apparent disparity in achieving proficiency out of the learning process (Obasi, 2011). The presence of this discrepancy in contexts such as Kaziba

can be attributed to the existence of multiple potential factors. First, even in instances where both genders are represented in the classroom, the environment may not be considered entirely gender-neutral. It is plausible that educators may, unconsciously, allocate more attention, encouragement, or speaking opportunities to boys (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Secondly, given Kaziba's status as a rural area in a fragile setting, it is evident that boys are often socially positioned to more effectively leverage the potential of English as a tool for upward mobility. This is due to the fact that they are encouraged to pursue careers or further education. For girls, the value of learning English may be diminished when societal expectations prioritize domestic roles over academic or professional advancement (UNESCO, 2020). Thirdly, girls face significant disadvantages in accessing education, including English language instruction. A multitude of factors, including cultural norms, early marriages, gender-based violence, household responsibilities, and economic pressures, have been identified as contributing to higher dropout rates among girls (UNICEF, 2020). In the event of girls' attendance at school, the irregular nature of their attendance can have a deleterious effect on their consistent exposure to English language instruction (UNESCO, 2021).

1.1 English as a Foreign Language in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a linguistically diverse country, with more than 200 local languages (Ethnologue, 2022). French is the official language and the primary language of instruction (Kasanga, 2012). However, given the country's expanding relations with English-speaking nations, particularly within the African continent, English has emerged as an increasingly prominent foreign language. In consideration of its affiliations, it is regarded as a constituent of the "expanding circle" of English language utilization. This indicates that English is not a native language, but rather a language acquired for professional, academic, and international communication purposes (Kasanga, 2012).

The Congolese national curriculum has officially incorporated English as a subject in secondary schools, recognizing the language's global significance (MEPST, 2014). Given the DRC's geographic proximity to numerous English-speaking nations, as well as its growing diplomatic and commercial links, the national education strategy views English studies as crucial to educating pupils to interact with the outside world. The curriculum places significant emphasis on English language competency, positing it as a pivotal instrument in fostering enhanced regional and global collaboration, as well as in the transcendence of communication barriers. The curriculum stipulates the following: "The study of English is of increasing importance for secondary school students in Congo at a time when the country is increasing its contacts with English-speaking countries, particularly those in Africa. Communication difficulties due to the use of different languages must be overcome" (MEPST, 2014).

For this reason, English is taught as a required subject for four years in regular secondary school, with five hours of instruction per week (MEPST, 2014). However, even with this extensive instruction, many Congolese students struggle to become functionally proficient in English. Context and classroom observations suggest that students struggle with fundamental communication skills, such as taking notes, understanding what they hear, formulating

questions, and writing compositions. According to Kakule (2021), students in DRC secondary schools often have difficulty completing essential English-language communication tasks in the classroom, highlighting a persistent gap between curriculum objectives and student outcomes.

Within the broader context of limited EFL (English as a Foreign Language) achievement, emerging observations suggest notable gender disparities in learner performance. Despite the overall modest levels of proficiency, observation of context in Kaziba, in the South Kivu province, suggests that male students exhibit comparatively higher English communication skills after completing secondary school when compared to their female peers. Although slight, these variations are regularly observed in the students' capacity to participate in English class discussions, pose and respond to questions, and write in English.

These disparities give rise to significant inquiries regarding the underlying factors that influence English language acquisition among male and female learners in Kaziba secondary schools. This discrepancy in performance may be attributed to gender-based variations in language learning strategies, motivation, classroom engagement, exposure to English outside of the classroom, and sociocultural expectations (Oxford, 1990, p. 8; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). Research conducted in various contexts of second-language acquisition has demonstrated that men and women may employ distinct cognitive, metacognitive, and affective methods, resulting in divergent language outcomes (Griffiths, 2008; Tuncer & Dogan, 2015). The disparities in Kaziba may be further influenced by regional educational customs, gender roles, and language-learning materials (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004).

This study thus aims to examine the extent and nature of gender-based differences in EFL learning strategies among secondary school students in Kaziba. This study aims to identify trends in the learning strategies employed by male and female students of English, with the objective of developing more equitable and efficient teaching methodologies for use in Congolese classrooms.

1.2 Problem Statement

The learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in the DRC is faced with several challenges. The most salient challenges confronting the educational system in general pertain to overcrowded classrooms, outdated teaching materials, and further contextual factors that adversely affect the learning environment (Mulumba & Masaazi, 2012). A further challenge that must be addressed is the disparity in enrollment of girls, which is attributable to a variety of contextual, cultural, economic, and social factors (UNESCO, 2021). In the DRC, there is a disparity in secondary school enrollment between girls and boys. The enrollment rate for girls is approximately 35-40%, while the rate for boys is 45-50% (World Bank, 2020). This discrepancy can be attributed to various factors, including early marriages, pregnancy, and household responsibilities. However, in the specific case of learning EFL in Kaziba, even the few girl students who reach and complete upper secondary school level are still unable to achieve basic communication in English. It has been documented that the level of English proficiency varies significantly across different regions and educational institutions. These variations are attributed to the heterogeneity of the student body and the instructional

methods employed by schools. However, despite the fact that they are taught by the same teachers, male students tend to demonstrate higher levels of proficiency than their female counterparts (Oxford, 1990). A multitude of factors may be considered when attempting to justify this phenomenon; however, the most salient of these factors pertain to the learning strategies employed and the underlying assumption that these strategies are adopted and selected in a manner that differs between male and female students (Green & Oxford, 1995). A body of research has indicated that male students are more inclined to utilize autonomous and competitive strategies, such as memory, cognitive, and compensatory mechanisms. In contrast, female students demonstrate a preference for collaborative learning and emotional support that is integrated into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Griffiths, 2008).

In the case of Kaziba, the situation remains ambiguous, leading to uncertainty among English teachers. Consequently, the necessity for this research was founded on the premise of elucidating students' learning strategies and their impact on learning outcomes.

1.3 Research Questions

In the aim of identifying students' learning strategies for learning EFL in Kaziba secondary schools; the present paper will be guided the main research question which is "What are the differences in language learning strategies used by male and female EFL learners in Kaziba secondary schools?"

This question will be supported by 3 sub-questions which are:

- Which specific language learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, social) are most frequently used by male students?
- Which specific language learning strategies are most frequently used by female students?
- Are there statistically significant gender-based differences in the use of direct learning strategies among EFL learners?

1.4 Language Learning Strategies (LSS)

A multitude of definitions have been proposed for the term "language learning strategies." According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are defined as "specific actions taken by learners to facilitate more efficient, expeditious, pleasurable, self-directed, effective, and transferable learning in novel situations." As Kesiana (2010) asserts, Language Learning Strategies (LLS) encompass behaviors, techniques, actions, or steps employed by students to facilitate their learning. These scholars concur that LLS represent autonomous actions undertaken by learners for the purpose of enhancing their learning effectiveness. Their perspective is further enriched by Anwar (2023), who defines LLS as actions or behaviors that facilitate not only language learning and usage to learners but also assist learners in receiving, retaining, and retrieval of new information. In addition to these didactic definitions, Karacan et al. (2023) examine LLS from a more linguistic perspective and define it as "any attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language, in order

to incorporate these into one's interlanguage competences." Learners thus exhibit independence, autonomy, and confidence in their selection of LLS, as it is an individual process inspired by their unique perspective of effective language learning. As Harya (2016) previously indicated, LLS are instruments that facilitate the development of independence and autonomy in learners, thereby fostering their transition into lifelong learners.

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been identified as pivotal components in the process of acquiring a new language. According to Bialystok (1979), there is a strong belief that language learning strategies play a vital role in the acquisition of a second or foreign language, directly influencing learners' achievement. This assertion is further substantiated by the seminal work of O'Malley and Chamot (1993), which posits that "individuals who adopt a more strategic approach demonstrate a faster and more effective acquisition of knowledge compared to those who do not." This finding suggests that the deliberate application of strategies can enhance the learning process and promote more efficient language acquisition. Furthermore, Nikolina and Josko (2011) contend that, in contrast to less proficient learners, "effective language learners possess a comprehensive array of learning strategies and employ an assortment of strategies, as opposed to relying on a solitary approach, when engaged in a learning endeavor." This underscores the significance of adaptability and diversity in strategic implementation. Concurrent with this, studies exploring the relationship between LLS and proficiency levels have demonstrated a positive correlation. For instance, Gharbavi and Mousavi (2012) found that "high proficient learners use more learning strategies more frequently than low proficient learners". These findings serve to reinforce the notion that both the nature and frequency of strategy implementation are closely associated with the efficacy of language learning.

1.5 Categories of Language Learning Strategies

The classification of language learning strategies (LLS) has been approached in a variety of ways by different scholars, who have employed different perspectives in their analysis. Rubin's taxonomy is a prominent classification system that categorizes language learning strategies into three parts: language strategies, communication strategies, and social strategies (Rubin, 1987). The second taxonomy is that of O'Malley, which categorizes language learning strategies into three groups: metacognitive (including selective attention, planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning activities); cognitive (including rehearsal, organization, inferencing, summarizing, reducing, imagery, transfer, and elaboration); and socio-affective strategies (including cooperation, questioning for clarification, and self-talk) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The third is Stern's taxonomy. His classification system comprises five distinct subcategories, including management and planning strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative-experiential strategies, interpersonal strategies, and affective strategies (Stern, 1992). Finally, the Wenden (1991) taxonomy categorizes them into two classifications: "cognitive strategies," which encompasses the processes of information selection, comprehension, storage, and retrieval, and "self-management strategies," which includes the monitoring and management of the learning process, including regulatory skills and self-directed learning skills (Wenden, 1991; Sarah et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, irrespective of these classifications, the present study is grounded in the classification proposed by Oxford's Taxonomy, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, which encompasses the vast majority of the propositions from the aforementioned taxonomies. This classification is regarded as both the most comprehensive and practical (Trisna, 2016), and as "the most accurate categorization to date" (Anwar, 2023). According to Oxford's Taxonomy, LLS is classified into two distinct categories of learning strategies. The initial category is known as Direct Strategies, which involves the utilization of students' cognitive processes, thereby exerting a direct influence on their learning outcomes. The aforementioned strategies are further sub-classified into three distinct categories: memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies. The second category is indirect strategies, which are relevant to students' management abilities. These strategies are further sub-classified into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Anwar, 2023).

1.5.1 Direct strategies

Direct strategies refer to the LSS that encompass specific techniques and actions that learners use to directly engage with and process the target language (Oxford, 1990). These strategies are necessary in facilitating active engagement in language acquisition, expanding vocabulary, comprehension of grammatical principles, and effective communication. They include memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies.

(1) Memory Strategies

Memory strategies are strategies that help learners remember gathered new information easily. According to Oxford (1990), memory strategies are strategies that help language learners store and retrieve new information when needed. Abdallaujod (2013) clarifies and explains it in simple words by indicating that memory strategies are techniques that help learners store ideas or words gathered from their learning minds and retrieve them as soon as they are needed.

The key memory strategies are repetition and review (which is based on the idea that regular revisiting of learned material strengthens memory retention) (Oxford, 1990); flashcards (which are a classic tool for vocabulary practice, allowing learners to test themselves and quickly review words or phrases) (Nation, 2001); mnemonics (which are memory aids that link new information to something familiar, such as acronyms, vivid images, or stories) (Levin, 1993); chunking (which stands for breaking down complex information into smaller, manageable parts [chunks], making it easier to process and remember) (Miller, 1956); association (which stands for connecting new words to images, sounds, emotions, or personal experiences to enhance recall) (Oxford, 1990); use in context (which means practicing new words or structures in sentences, conversations, or real-life situations to help solidify understanding and recall) (Nation, 2001); mind maps (which means creating visual diagrams that connect related words or concepts to help organize information and make recall easier) (Buzan, 1993); rhymes, songs, and stories (as learning through music, rhymes, or narrative can make memorization more engaging and effective, especially for auditory learners) (Medina, 1993); teaching someone else (as explaining new material to another person reinforces one's own understanding and memory) (Fiorella & Mayer, 2013); and using senses

(as engaging multiple senses like seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling when learning new words or phrases can enhance memory) (Paivio, 1986).

(2) Cognitive Strategies

In language learning, cognitive strategies are defined as deliberate cognitive processes employed by students to process, comprehend, and engage with language data, with the objective of enhancing language production, memory, and understanding (Zakiah, 2019). These skills involve the active application of language through a range of cognitive processes, including organization, analysis, reasoning, and summary.

The key cognitive strategies are repetition (which means repeating new words, phrases, or grammatical structures to reinforce memory and understanding) (Oxford, 1990); organizing new language (by grouping vocabulary or grammar rules by themes, categories, or patterns) (Oxford, 1990); summarizing meaning (which stands for paraphrasing or condensing information from texts, conversations, or lessons to capture the main ideas) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); guessing meaning from context (by inferring the meanings of unknown words or phrases based on surrounding information in a text or conversation) (Nation, 2001); using imagery for memorization (which stands for creating mental images or visual associations to help remember new language items) (Paivio, 1986); analyzing and reasoning (which means breaking down language rules, identifying patterns, and applying logic to understand how the language works) (Oxford, 1990); practicing (which means engaging in exercises or activities that require the application of new language knowledge, such as writing sentences, completing grammar drills, or role-playing conversations) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); self-testing and monitoring (which stands for regularly checking one's own understanding and progress through quizzes, flashcards, or self-assessment activities) (Griffiths, 2008); resourcing (which stands for using dictionaries, reference books, or digital tools to look up meanings, translations, or explanations) (Oxford, 1990); and categorizing (which means sorting vocabulary or grammar items into logical groups to facilitate learning and recall) (Nation, 2001).

(3) Compensation Strategies

Compensation strategies are linguistic techniques employed by language learners to bridge gaps in their knowledge and facilitate communication in situations where the precise vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation required for a real-life context is not available (Oxford, 1990). They are used to help EFL learners to compensate their limitations in English communication. According to Oxford (1990), compensation strategies are meant to overcome knowledge gaps, communicate in the target language, and develop strategic competence.

The key compensation strategies are guessing from context (which describes the situation where learners infer the meaning of unknown words or phrases by analyzing the surrounding context in a text or conversation) (Oxford, 1990), using synonyms and paraphrasing (mostly when a learner does not know the exact word, they use a similar word or rephrase the idea using known vocabulary) (Oxford, 1990), gestures and body language (standing for non-verbal communication, such as pointing, miming, or using facial expressions, helps

convey meaning when words are insufficient) (Tarone, 1980), asking for help (which is when learners directly ask for clarification, repetition, or translation from a teacher or conversation partner) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), self-repetition and fillers (which is when learners repeat words or phrases, or use fillers like “um,” “you know,” “let me think,” to buy time and recall or construct the next part of the message) (Faerch & Kasper, 1983), word coinage (which is about creating new words or phrases based on existing knowledge of the target language) (Tarone, 1980), switching to the first language (which is any temporary use of words or phrases from the learner's native language, especially when under pressure or in informal settings) (Tarone, 1980), and approximation (which is about using a word or phrase that is close in meaning to the intended word, even if it is not exact) (Tarone, 1980).

1.5.2 Indirect Strategies

Indirect learning strategies refer to techniques that facilitate and enhance language learning without necessitating direct mental processing of the language (Oxford, 1990). Conversely, they facilitate students' self-regulation, emotional management, and social interaction, thereby fostering an environment conducive to effective language acquisition. These strategies encompass metacognitive, affective, and social dimensions.

(1) Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies in language learning are techniques that facilitate learners' self-regulation of their learning processes, including planning, monitoring, evaluating, and regulating. According to Wen and Teng (2023), they refer to the cognitive processes used by learners to ‘think about their thinking’. These elements encompass reflections and activities designed to assist learners in reflecting on their learning process, formulating plans for their learning, monitoring the progression of their learning, and evaluating the outcomes of their learning. The implementation of metacognitive strategies in the learning process has been demonstrated to result in the development of effective learning skills in students, thereby equipping them with the capacity to address challenges encountered within the English curriculum (Oxford, 1990).

The key metacognitive strategies are planning (which is about learners setting goals, choosing appropriate strategies, and organizing their study time and resources) (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), monitoring (implying facts like students actively checking their understanding and progress during learning) (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), evaluating (referring to the fact of learners reflecting on what worked well and what did not, after completing a task) (Oxford, 1990), and regulating (which is about learners adjusting their strategies or study habits, based on evaluation) (Anderson, 2002).

(2) Affective Strategies

Affective strategies in language learning are techniques learners employ to manage their emotions, attitudes, motivation, and self-esteem throughout the learning process (Oxford, 1990). The efficacy of these techniques stems from their ability to influence language learning by prompting learners to disregard their emotions and focus on their learning process (Arnold & Brown, 1999). The rationale for affective strategies is that affective factors, such

as self-esteem, self-confidence, anxiety, fear of failure, shyness, motivation, attitude, and empathy, influence the development of speaking skills (Young, 1991). The acquisition of foreign language speaking skills is hindered by negative affective factors, while positive affective factors facilitate it (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986).

The key features of affective strategies include managing anxiety and stress (as learners use relaxation techniques, deep breathing, or mindfulness exercises to lower anxiety and create a calmer state for learning) (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), encouraging oneself (as positive self-talk, self-reward, and setting achievable goals help learners maintain motivation and build confidence) (Oxford, 1990), taking emotional temperature (as this involves self-awareness and reflection on one's emotional state) (Oxford, 1990), building a positive attitude (as maintaining a positive outlook toward language learning, embracing mistakes as part of the process, and focusing on progress rather than perfection help sustain motivation and enjoyment) (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998), and seeking support (as seeking encouragement or reassurance from teachers or peers can also be seen as an affective strategy when it helps manage emotions or boost confidence) (Oxford, 1990; Arnold & Brown, 1999).

(3) Social Strategies

Social strategies are techniques used in language learning that improve communication and language acquisition by interacting and working together with others (Oxford, 1990). These techniques are based on the knowledge that language acquisition is essentially a social activity and that it works best when students interact with teachers, peers, and even native speakers (Vygotsky, 1978; Oxford, 1990).

The key features of social strategies include asking questions (as learners seek clarification, verification, or correction from others) (Oxford, 1990), cooperating with others (as learners work together with peers or teachers in collaborative activities such as group projects, pair work, or cooperative learning tasks) (Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 1990), and empathizing with others (as learners develop cultural understanding and become aware of others' thoughts and feelings) (Brown, 2007).

1.6 Gender and Language Learning Strategies

The study of gender has been a focal point in research on language learning strategies (LLS), with investigations examining whether male and female language learners vary in the frequency and types of strategies they employ when learning a new language (Green & Oxford, 1995). The relationship is intricate due to the fact that a multitude of studies have been conducted and yielded disparate results. A number of these studies have indicated an absence of significant gender effects (Griffiths, 2003; Nisbet et al., 2005), while others have emphasized notable differences (Wharton, 2000; Yang, 1999). Nevertheless, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that female learners often employ indirect learning strategies, while their male counterparts tend to utilize direct learning strategies (Lee, 2010). Female foreign language learners prefer metacognitive strategies (allowing them to plan, monitor and self-evaluate), affective strategies (allowing them to manage emotions), and social strategies (facilitating learning through interaction) (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). This suggests that they frequently

approach language learning with greater self-control, emotional intelligence, and social engagement. Male foreign language learners, on the other hand, are reported to favor cognitive strategies (through memorization, analyzing and practicing) and compensation strategies (as they prefer guessing and using context to understand) (Hong, 2006). They also show preferences for autonomous, problem-focused, and pragmatic techniques (Oxford, 2011).

Table 1. Learning strategy preferences by gender

Gender	Most Frequent Strategies	Notable Characteristics
Female	Metacognitive, Affective, Social	Self-regulated, collaborative, emotionally aware
Male	Cognitive, Compensation, Social	Practical, independent, problem-focused

Source: Oxford (1990).

Based on the above affirmations, research has demonstrated that female students frequently demonstrate higher levels of language achievement in assessments than their male counterparts (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Lee, 2010). This discrepancy can be attributed, at least in part, to the adoption of more effective and varied strategies by female students (Green & Oxford, 1995). The efficacy of language learning is influenced by gender-based preferences for techniques, with females typically demonstrating greater success and competence due to their propensity to utilize a more extensive array of strategies (Hong, 2006). High-achieving females may demonstrate a reduced reliance on emotive methods; however, female learners exhibiting lower or average proficiency tend to employ emotive methods to persevere through difficulties (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Oxford, 1996). However, the relationship between these factors is multifaceted, influenced by numerous variables such as context, instructional methodologies, and the proficiency level of the learners (Griffiths, 2003).

2. Method

The present study employed a quantitative approach to investigate gender-based differences in EFL learning strategies (Cohen, 2014; Griffiths, 2013). This research method involves the measurement and analysis of numerical data to establish relationships between variables and draw conclusions. The utilization of statistical analysis facilitates the discernment of patterns, the formulation of predictions, and the extension of findings to a more extensive population. The present study's findings underscore the utility of the aforementioned methodology, as it enabled the objective measurement and comparison of the frequency and types of strategies employed by male and female learners. This approach facilitated the identification of statistically significant differences between the two groups, a crucial step in addressing research inquiries concerning gender-based patterns.

This implementation entailed the administration of a questionnaire, meticulously crafted from a widely recognized and scientifically validated scale (Oxford, 1990), to assess the learning strategies employed by learners. The questionnaire was then utilized to draw comparisons

between learners' strategies and their subsequent outcomes, with a particular focus on gender-related disparities.

2.1 Research Instrument

The instrument employed for the collection of data in the present investigation is the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version 7.0. The test was developed by Rebecca Oxford in 1989 for students learning a second or foreign language (Oxford, 1990). Presently, it is a widely utilized self-report questionnaire for the assessment of language learning strategies among second or foreign language learners, particularly those engaged in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning (Griffiths, 2007; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The questionnaire under consideration is comprised of fifty items, and the background information is drawn from Oxford's original SILL. It is made up of six sub-scales grouped in 2 categories namely the direct strategies (including memory, cognitive and compensation strategies), and indirect strategies (including metacognitive, affective and social strategies) (Oxford, 1990). This feature enables students to ascertain the frequency with which they employ language learning strategies. The assessment is conducted on a scale ranging from 1, representing "Never or almost never true of me," to 5, representing "Always or almost always true of me".

For the present investigation, the SILL Version 7.0 was translated into French, the language in which the participants expressed themselves most comfortably and at ease. Two bilinguals and language experts were contracted to translate the documents. Subsequent to the completion of the translation, a preliminary evaluation was undertaken to ascertain the internal reliability of the translation. The results of this preliminary test demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha indicating a satisfactory degree of validity and reliability.

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were primarily third and fourth grade students, ranging in age from 11 to 25. The selection of these classes was predicated on their status as the final years of secondary education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, wherein students have already accumulated a minimum of two years of English language instruction. Consequently, they possess the capacity to articulate their learning experiences and the strategies they employ. A total of 264 pupils participated in the study, with 46% of the participants identifying as male and 56% as female. The participants in this study were drawn from two secondary schools: Namurhera, which had 192 respondents, and Mukamu, which had 72 pupils. The majority of the subjects in the study were between the ages of 16 and 20 (77.2%). The demographic is presented in the following table:

Table 2. Sampling table

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	122	46
	Female	142	54
	Total	264	100
Age	11-15	12	5
	16-20	204	77
	21-25	48	18
	Total	264	100
Class	Grade 3	160	61
	Grade 4	104	39
	Total	264	100

2.3 Data Collection and Management

For the purpose of data collection in this investigation, a paper-based questionnaire was administered during regular class hours with the permission of the school's administration. The students were informed of the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. Following the collection of data, descriptive statistics were utilized to ascertain the most frequently employed strategies among male and female students, employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). To identify statistically significant differences between genders, independent samples t-tests were conducted.

3. Results

This chapter presents the findings derived from the survey conducted on the learning strategies employed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in secondary schools located in Kaziba, DRC. The primary aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of the various strategies used by students, drawing on the framework of direct and indirect language learning strategies as established in the literature. The results are systematically organized and presented according to these two broad categories. Furthermore, the data are disaggregated by gender to allow for a comparative analysis between male and female students in terms of the frequency and patterns of strategy use. This comparative approach is intended to highlight any notable differences or trends that may exist between the two groups,

thereby offering deeper insights into the learning behaviors of EFL students in this specific context.

Table 3. Language learning strategies used by EFL learners

Learning Strategies	1		2		3		4		5	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Memory strategies	46	17.34	41	15.42	66	24.91	75	28.11	32	12.21
Cognitive strategies	20	7.63	41	15.53	82	31.33	92	34.9	26	9.74
Compensation strategies	38	14.26	40	14.76	57	21.72	75	28.15	53	20.08
Direct strategies	35	13	41	15	68	25.99	81	30.39	37	14.01
Metacognitive strategies	28	10.56	50	19.02	69	26.68	73	27.87	40	15.11
Affective strategies	58	21.97	80	30.3	62	23.36	35	13.51	26	9.98
Social strategies	35	13.38	60	22.85	70	26.39	54	20.33	40	15.4
Indirect strategies	40	15.30	63	24.06	67	25.48	54	20.57	35	13.50

Note. 1 = Never true for me, 2 = Usually not true for me, 3 = Somewhat not true for me, 4 = Usually true of me, 5 = Always true of me.

Source: Data.

As shown in Table 3, 28.11% of students usually used memory strategies while learning a language, and 12.21% always used them. Therefore, 40.32% of students used memory strategies when learning EFL. Regarding cognitive strategies, Table 3 shows that 34.9% of students usually used them and 9.74% always used them. The results imply that 44.64% of students used cognitive strategies when learning EFL. Table 3 also shows that 28.15% of students usually used compensation strategies, while 20.08% always used them when learning EFL. This implies that 48.23% of students used compensation strategies when learning EFL. Regarding metacognitive strategies, the results show that 27.87% of students usually used them, while 15.11% always used them. This implies that 42.98% of students used metacognitive strategies when learning EFL. Table 3 also shows that 13.51% of students usually used affective strategies, while 9.98% always used them. This implies that 23.49% of students used social strategies when learning EFL. Overall, the results show that 30.39% of learners usually used direct learning strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation), while 14.01% always used them. This implies that, in general, 44.40% of students used direct strategies when learning languages. Regarding indirect learning strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social), Table 3 shows that 20.57% of students usually used them, while only 13.50% always used them. Figure 1 illustrates the language learning strategies used by EFL

learners.

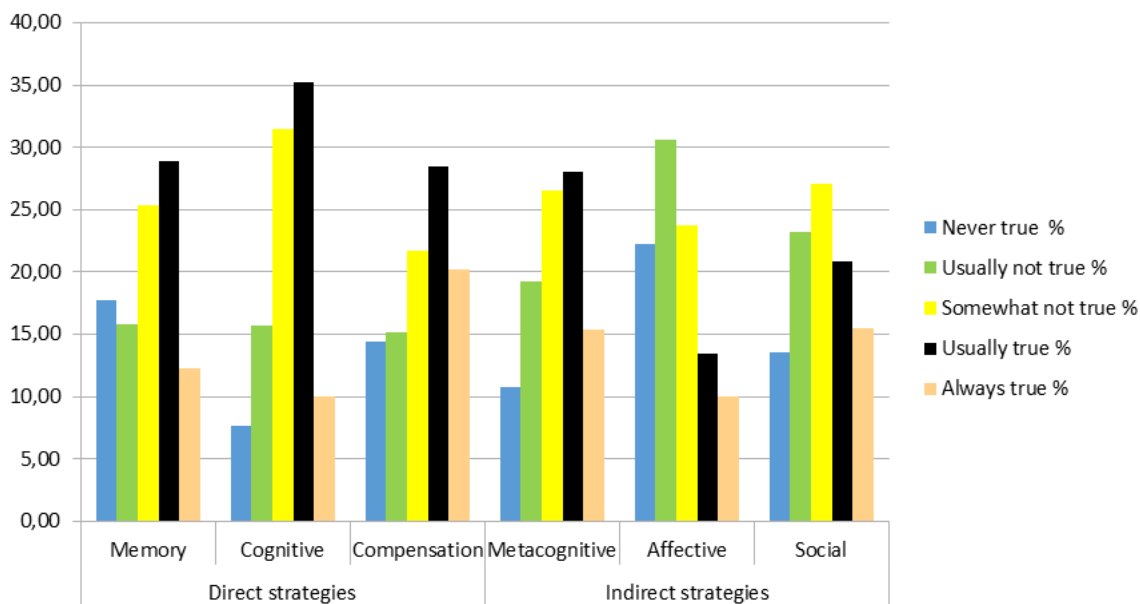


Figure 1. Language learning strategies used by EFL learners

As demonstrated in Table 4, 15.91% of male students reported using memory strategies in learning EFL on a regular basis, while 24.41% of female students employed these strategies at an equivalent frequency. Consequently, females exhibited a greater reliance on memory strategies. As illustrated in Table 4, 17.26% of male students and 27.38% of female students employed cognitive strategies. This finding suggests that female EFL learners employ more cognitive strategies than their male counterparts. With regard to the utilization of compensation learning strategies, the same Table 4 demonstrates that 30.68% of males employed these strategies, while 17.55% of female students employed them at a similar frequency. This finding suggests that male students employed compensation learning strategies to a greater extent than their female counterparts. In summary for direct learning strategies, Table 4 reveals that 19.09% of male EFL learners usually or always employed direct strategies, while this figure increased to 24.43% for females. The findings suggest that female students employed more direct strategies in their learning of EFL than their male counterparts.

Table 4. Students' EFL learning strategies by gender

EFL Learning Strategies	Gender	1		2		3		4		5	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Memory strategies	Male	25	9.34	21	8.00	30	11.36	27	10.10	15	5.81
	Female	21	8.00	20	7.42	36	13.55	48	18.01	17	6.40
Cognitive strategies	Male	12	4.71	26	9.96	36	13.74	30	11.36	16	5.90
	Female	8	2.92	15	5.57	46	17.59	62	23.54	10	3.84
Compensation strategies	Male	6	2.27	10	3.27	25	9.47	49	18.43	32	12.25
	Female	32	11.99	30	11.49	32	12.25	26	9.72	21	7.83
Direct strategies	Male	15	5.64	22	8.46	29	9.89	31	12.4	19	6.66
	Female	20	7.57	19	7.37	39	14.7	50	19	17	5.46
Metacognitive strategies	Male	7	2.48	11	4.21	31	12.12	44	16.84	27	10.31
	Female	21	8.08	39	14.81	38	14.56	29	11.03	13	4.80
Affective strategies	Male	25	9.47	33	12.37	26	9.72	20	7.70	17	6.44
	Female	33	12.50	47	17.93	36	13.64	15	5.81	9	3.54
Social strategies	Male	20	7.70	38	14.52	31	11.62	17	6.31	13	5.05
	Female	15	5.68	22	8.33	39	14.77	37	14.02	27	10.35
Indirect strategies	Male	17	6.6	27	10.4	29	11.1	27	10.2	19	7.20
	Female	23	8.7	36	13.6	38	14.3	27	10.2	16	6.19

Note. 1 = Never true for me, 2 = Usually not true for me, 3 = Somewhat not true for me, 4 = Usually true of me, 5 = Always true of me.

Source: Data.

With regard to metacognitive strategies, the results in Table 4 demonstrate that 27.15% of male students used them so frequently, compared to 15.83% of female students. This finding suggests that male students employed to a greater extent some metacognitive strategies than their female counterparts. As illustrated in Table 4, the findings demonstrate that 14.14% of male EFL learners employed affective strategies so frequently, compared to 9.35% for female students. This finding suggests that males employed more affective strategies than females. As for social strategies, the results presented in Table 4 demonstrate that 11.35% of male students employed social strategies, in contrast to 24.37% of female students. This finding suggests that female students employed social strategies to a greater extent than their male counterparts. And so, in general for indirect strategies, the findings of this study demonstrated

that 17.40% of male students employed indirect strategies in their EFL learning, in contrast to the 16.39% of their female counterparts. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, there is significant variability in the EFL learning strategies employed by students according to gender.

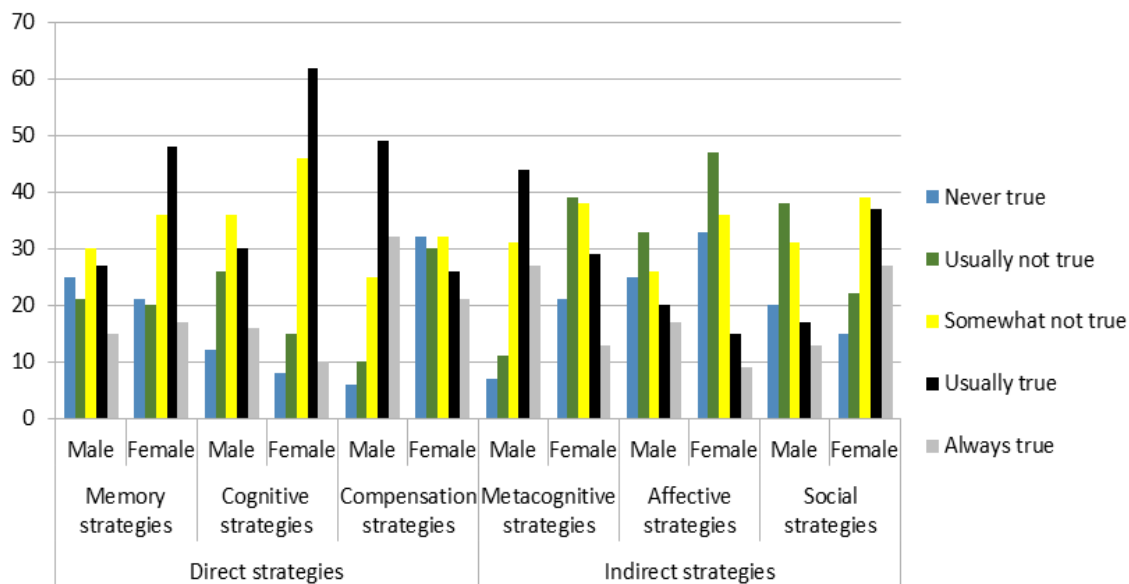


Figure 2. Language learning strategies used by EFL learners

The study also investigated the existence of any significant differences between male and female students with regard to the strategies employed in learning EFL. To this end, an independent sample t-test was computed and the results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of the Average Mean Scores between Male and Female Students in Terms of EFL Learning Strategies

Types of Learning Strategies	Gender	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Memory strategies	Male	122	2.70	1.34	1.674	0.095
	Female	142	2.97	1.24		
Cognitive strategies	Male	122	2.70	1.25	3.403	0.001**
	Female	142	3.19	1.09		
Compensation strategies	Male	122	3.80	1.05	7.095	0.000**
	Female	142	2.85	1.09		
Direct strategies	Male	122	2.93	0.97	0.715	0.475
	Female	142	3.02	1.12		
Metacognitive strategies	Male	122	3.44	1.26	5.999	0.000**
	Female	142	2.53	1.18		
Affective strategies	Male	122	2.60	1.26	1.699	0.090
	Female	142	2.35	1.16		
Social strategies	Male	122	2.42	1.12	6.146	0.000**
	Female	142	3.35	1.29		
Indirect strategies	Male	122	2.65	1.05	0.269	0.788
	Female	142	2.61	1.10		

Source: Data.

Results in Table 3 indicate that EFL direct learning strategies used by students varied by gender, where males ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.97$) used generally less direct learning strategies than females ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.12$). However, the results indicate that no statistically significant difference was found between male and female students in terms of direct EFL learning strategies [$t(262) = 0.715$; $p > 0.05$]. This implies that both male and female students use equally the direct EFL learning strategies. However, in regards to specific strategies, some differences are highlighted. For instance, there was a statistically significant difference between males and females in terms use of cognitive strategies [$t(262) = 3.403$; $p < 0.05$], with females using more cognitive strategies ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.09$) than males ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.25$); and compensation strategies [$t(262) = 7.095$; $p < 0.05$] with males using more compensation strategies ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.05$) than females ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.09$). These findings infer that female students use more cognitive learning strategies than their male students; while for some specific strategies (like compensation), male students are reported to

use more than their male counterparts. For other forms of EFL direct learning strategy such as memory strategies, no statistically significant difference was observed between male and female students.

In addition, the results in Table 3 indicate EFL indirect learning strategies used by students varied by gender, where males ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.05$) used generally more indirect learning strategies than females ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.10$). However, the results of the Independent T-test indicate that no statistically significant difference was found between male and female students in terms of indirect EFL learning strategies [$t(262) = 0.269$; $p > 0.05$]. This finding suggests that both male and female students employ indirect EFL learning strategies to an equivalent degree. However, when certain types of indirect learning strategies are considered, the findings indicate that male students ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.26$) utilise metacognitive learning strategies more frequently than their female counterparts ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.118$).

Furthermore, a statistically significant difference was found between male and female students in their use of metacognitive learning strategies [$t(262) = 5.99$; $p < 0.05$], where male students used more metacognitive strategies for learning EFL than their female colleagues. Regarding social strategies, the results show that females ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.29$) used more these learning strategies than males ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.12$). In particular, a statistically significant difference was found between male and female students in their use of social strategies in learning EFL [$t(262) = 6.146$; $p < 0.05$], where females used more social strategies than males. These findings infer that male students use more metacognitive learning strategies than their female students, while female students use more social strategies than their male counterparts. For the other form of indirect EFL learning strategies such as affective strategy, no significant difference was observed between male and female students.

4. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of a study that investigated how secondary school students in Kaziba, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), employed English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning strategies in a gender-specific manner. The discussion focuses on the relative use and importance of each category by gender, examining its implications within the broader socio-educational context of rural DRC. The approach employed in this study draws from a range of tactics, both direct and indirect, as classified by Oxford (1990).

4.1 Overview of Language Learning Strategy Use

The findings show that Kaziba secondary school students employ a variety of language learning strategies (LLS), although at moderate frequencies overall. Compensation strategies emerged as the most frequently used, followed by cognitive, metacognitive, memory, social, and affective strategies. The overall pattern indicates students demonstrate proactive methods to address communication barriers and mental obstacles during EFL learning while modifying their approaches based on situation requirements. The data reveal direct strategy use at 44.40% compared to indirect strategy use at 34.07%. The learners in the selected Kaziba secondary schools show a stronger preference for direct language strategies as these

involve active manipulation of language which could result from instruction methods that focus on memorization and sentence building and vocabulary guessing rather than affective or reflective methods.

4.2 Gender-Based Differences in Strategy Use

4.2.1 Direct Strategies

Direct strategies, which include memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, are slightly more common among female learners ($M = 3.02$) than male learners ($M = 2.93$), although the difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.475$). However, disaggregated analysis reveals nuanced gender patterns.

The findings of the analysis indicate that female students utilize cognitive strategies more frequently than their male counterparts, with mean scores of 3.19 and 2.70, respectively ($p = 0.001$). These results align with existing scientific literature (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995) and suggest that female learners prefer cognitive processes such as organizing, summarizing, and practicing. These results suggest that female students tend to follow structured patterns, a practice encouraged by traditional teaching methods such as note-taking and rule-following. Cognitive strategies have also been reported to yield positive results, as demonstrated in previous experimental studies. Therefore, the lack of a positive impact on English learning among female students in Kaziba is likely due to several contextual factors like irregular school attendance and discouragement based on societal biases.

The findings of this investigation have also shown that male students employ compensation strategies at a higher rate than female students ($M = 3.80$ vs. $M = 2.85$, $p = 0.000$). It is worth recalling that compensation strategies merely rely on learning techniques such as guessing from context, use of synonyms and language switching; which suggest that male learners display increased readiness to take communication risks while overcoming knowledge gaps. The pattern stands as a well-established fact in language learning strategy research which demonstrates that boys typically use practical problem-solving methods to approach language learning (Griffiths, 2008). As for memory strategies, the findings revealed that male and female students used them almost equally. This suggests that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in secondary schools in Kaziba likely emphasizes rote learning as the primary approach to language teaching.

4.2.2 Indirect Strategies

Regarding indirect strategies, male students demonstrated slightly higher use of indirect strategies than their female counterparts, but the differences between them proved statistically insignificant ($p = 0.788$). The analysis of specific strategy categories revealed important gender differences in metacognitive and social strategy usage.

Male learners demonstrated considerably higher usage of metacognitive strategies compared to female learners ($M = 3.44$ vs. $M = 2.53$, $p = 0.000$). The strategies involve planning, monitoring and evaluating learning processes for independent learning practices. This finding

contradicts established research which demonstrates stronger self-regulation abilities in female students (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). This can still be based on what was mentioned earlier in the state of research that in the Kaziba setting, boys can receive more encouragement to control their academic development as a means of reaching career goals, which probably helps them develop better metacognitive practices (Oxford, 2017).

Female students were reported to use social strategies at a significantly higher rate than male students ($M = 3.35$ vs. $M = 2.42$, $p = 0.000$). The three social strategy techniques which include asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing demonstrate evidence of female students having greater sociolinguistic interaction as found in previous research by Ehrman and Oxford (1995). The cultural expectations regarding female students to engage in communication and interpersonal response activities probably explain their greater use of social strategies during academic activities.

The study found no significant gender differences in affective strategy usage although male students averaged slightly more usage than female students ($M = 2.60$ vs. $M = 2.35$). The slight difference in affective strategy usage between male and female students suggests different emotional coping mechanisms during language learning which requires qualitative analysis.

4.3 Interpretation in Light of Contextual Factors

The review of literature has revealed that that public schools in DRC face persistent challenges, including large class sizes, outdated resources, and cultural gender inequalities. According to UNESCO (2021), numerous obstacles impede the education of girls, including early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and constrained academic achievement. These constraints likely influence the availability of time for language practice and the types of strategies employed. The hypothesis that boys exhibit a greater tendency to employ metacognitive strategies in their academic pursuits can be attributed to the influence of societal, academic, and professional expectations, which engender a greater prevalence of self-directed learning opportunities. The adoption of social strategies by girls is likely an adaptive approach to decreased classroom interaction due to their domestic responsibilities, which result in irregular attendance.

In Kaziba educational system, there is an evident paucity of affective learning methods employed by students, which can be attributed to an absence of adequate emotional intelligence instruction. According to Dörnyei (2005), affective variables, including anxiety and motivation, play vital roles in second language acquisition, revealing an opportunity for educational improvement.

4.4 Implications for Teaching and Policy

The results of this study have significant educational implications. First, the EFL teaching approach in Kaziba should integrate strategy-based teaching methods that adapt to gender differences. The educational system must incorporate instructor training to facilitate the identification of varied learning strategies among students. This training is crucial for promoting mental strategies among female students and fostering the adoption of social and

communicative methods among male students. Second, the significant disparity in social strategy utilization across gender lines underscores the imperative to cultivate classroom environments that foster equitable collaboration opportunities for boys and girls alike, while also promoting balanced participation in question-asking and seeking assistance. The implementation of such measures would enhance emotional engagement in learning and reduce reliance on trial-and-error strategies. Finally, it is imperative for policymakers to establish programs that dismantle educational barriers for girls by implementing flexible attendance policies and supplementary tutoring sessions. These measures are crucial for enhancing the continuity and quality of English language instruction.

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the use of language learning strategies by EFL learners in Kaziba secondary schools. The findings have demonstrated that while EFL learners in Kaziba demonstrate moderate use of both direct and indirect language learning strategies, gender-based variations do exist, particularly in the types of strategies employed. Female students were found to use cognitive and social strategies more frequently, reflecting a collaborative and structured approach to language acquisition. In contrast, male students demonstrated a higher reliance on compensation and metacognitive strategies, suggesting a pragmatic and self-regulated learning style. While the utilization of direct and indirect strategies did not demonstrate statistically significant gender disparities, the observed patterns within specific strategy categories underscore the significance of contextual and sociocultural influences on learning behaviors. The data suggest that educational structures in Kaziba; characterized by resource limitations, irregular attendance, and gendered expectations; play a critical role in shaping learners' strategic choices. In light of these findings, this study recommends that EFL pedagogy in rural Congolese schools incorporate strategy-based instruction that is sensitive to gender dynamics. To that end, targeted teacher training, inclusive classroom practices, and policy interventions addressing gender disparities in access and participation are essential to fostering equitable and effective language learning environments. Future research should complement these quantitative insights with qualitative approaches to further explore the motivations and constraints underpinning learners' strategic preferences.

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Barthelemy Muzaliwa Balume was responsible for the study design, conceptualization, and analysis of the findings. Olivier Kabeza conducted the literature review and was responsible for data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. There were no special agreements concerning authorship, and contributions were not equal; each author contributed according to their area of expertise.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data Sharing Statement

No additional data are available.

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