The Relationship between Language Learning Strategies and Beliefs among Afghan EFL Learners: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This study addresses a notable gap in the literature concerning the relationship between language learning strategies (LLSs) and learner beliefs among Afghan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Utilizing an explanatory mixed methods design, the research aimed to identify the LLSs employed by Afghan EFL learners, explore their beliefs about language acquisition, and examine the relationship between these beliefs and strategy use. The sample comprised 71 intermediate-level EFL learners, aged 18 to 35, selected through convenience sampling from various academic disciplines and institutions across Afghanistan. Data collection involved quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were gathered via online questionnaires (SILL and BALLI) and analyzed using SPSS with descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficient, while qualitative data from phone and WhatsApp interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings indicated a strong preference for writing and reading strategies alongside a widespread belief in the inherent difficulty of language learning. Furthermore, a moderate positive correlation was found between the belief in language learning difficulty and the use of writing strategies (r = 0.258, p = 0.019). Thematic analysis revealed key themes such as a strategic focus on writing, the significance of self-regulated learning, and the impact of contextual factors. These results highlight the necessity for pedagogical interventions that enhance learner confidence, provide explicit strategy instruction, and encourage balanced skill development to improve EFL proficiency and foster learner autonomy within the Afghan context.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, Afghan EFL learners, Learner beliefs, Mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

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Language learning strategies (LLSs) and learners' beliefs have emerged as two pivotal constructs in the field of second language acquisition, each exerting a significant influence on language learning outcomes. However, despite their individual importance, the relationship between these constructs remains insufficiently explored, particularly in under-researched contexts such as Afghanistan. While numerous studies have investigated LLSs or learners' beliefs independently, there is a notable lack of systematic and critical examination of how these constructs interact dynamically to influence language learning processes and outcomes. The main point is that the construct of LLSs and belief are especially pronounced in the Afghan context separately, where socio-political and educational complexities add layers of influence on learners' strategic behavior and belief systems (Orfan, 2020; Noori, 2022; Najafi et al., 2023; Rahmani, 2023; Rafiei Sakhaei et al., 2023; Tareen, 2023; Zaheer & Hashimi, 2023), yet research has not adequately integrated these factors to provide a comprehensive understanding.

LLSs in this study are defined as the conscious, goal-directed actions and techniques that learners employ to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of a new language. These strategies encompass cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies, which collectively enable learners to actively regulate and enhance their language learning process (Oxford, 1990; Hardan, 2013; Dan et al., 2025). Learners' beliefs, in this context, refer specifically to learners' perceptions and attitudes regarding their own language learning abilities and the effectiveness of various strategies, with a focus on perceived language proficiency — that is, learners' self-assessment of their competence and performance in the target language (Agustin et al., 2021; Najafi et al., 2024; Pirhonen, 2024). These beliefs shape motivation, persistence, and strategic choices, thereby influencing language learning success (Rahmani, 2023; Zaheer & Hashimi, 2023; Shobeiry et al., 2023; Pirhonen, 2024). Understanding these constructs takes on particular importance within the Afghan context, where the multilingual landscape—shaped by complex historical, socio-political, and educational factors—poses unique challenges and opportunities for English language learners. Despite the growing role of English in education and professional domains, Afghan learners face persistent obstacles such as limited resources, uneven pedagogical practices, and socio-cultural barriers. These realities highlight the critical need to explore not only which strategies Afghan learners employ but also how their beliefs about language learning influence and interact with their strategic behaviors. While previous research in Afghanistan has tended to focus separately on learners' strategies or attitudes toward English, it has

often overlooked the nuanced interplay between beliefs and strategy use (Atifnigar et al., 2020; Orfan, 2020; Noori, 2022; Rahmani, 2023; Zaheer & Hashimi, 2023). Consequently, a significant gap remains in understanding how Afghan EFL learners' beliefs shape their selection and application of LLSs, limiting the development of pedagogical interventions that effectively promote learner autonomy and strategic competence tailored to their perceptions of proficiency and learning needs. Therefore, this study seeks to systematically examine the relationship between language learning strategies and learners' beliefs among Afghan EFL learners. By situating this inquiry within the specific educational context of Afghanistan, the research aims to generate contextually relevant insights that can inform both theory and practice. In doing so, it responds to the pressing need for research that not only describes what learners do but also elucidates why they do it, thereby contributing to a deeper and more actionable understanding of language learning in Afghanistan.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Theoretical Framework
2.1.1. Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)

LLSs are deliberate, goal-oriented actions and techniques that learners use to facilitate the acquisition, retention, and practical use of a new language (Hardan, 2013). Building on sociocognitive frameworks—particularly self-regulated learning (SRL) models such as Dan et al. (2025)—LLSs are typically categorized into several interrelated domains:

- **Cognitive strategies** involve direct manipulation of the language material, such as summarizing, deducing meaning, inferencing, and practicing new structures. These strategies help learners process and internalize new information.
- **Metacognitive strategies** focus on planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own learning. Learners set goals, organize study schedules, track their progress, and adjust their approaches as needed, which is central to SRL models.
- **Memory-related strategies** include techniques for storing and retrieving information, such as using mnemonics, visualization, and repetition to reinforce vocabulary and grammar.
- **Social strategies** entail interacting with others to practice language, seek clarification, and negotiate meaning—activities that are especially important in communicative and collaborative learning environments.

Effective use of these strategies allows learners to actively manage their learning processes, adapt to new challenges, and steadily improve their language proficiency (Oxford, 1990; Hardan, 2013; Agustin et al., 2021; Dan et al., 2025). Research in the field of Afghan EFL learners, for example, highlights the importance of self-regulation and adaptive strategy use in overcoming contextual barriers such as limited resources and inconsistent instructional quality (Rahmani, 2023; Tareen, 2023; Zaheer & Hashimi, 2023). By fostering strategic awareness and self-regulation, learners become more autonomous and resilient, which is crucial for sustained language development, particularly in challenging educational contexts.

2.1.2. Learners' Beliefs toward Language Learning and Perceived Proficiency

Learners' beliefs encompass the perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions individuals hold about language learning, including their self-efficacy, understanding of language proficiency, and the perceived value of various learning strategies (Agustin et al., 2021; Pirhonen, 2024; Xia et al., 2024). A critical dimension of these beliefs is perceived language proficiency, which refers to learners' self-assessment of their competence and performance in the target language (Pirhonen, 2024). These beliefs are not formed in isolation; rather, they emerge from a dynamic interplay between individual experiences and broader socio-cultural and historical contexts, as emphasized by poststructuralist perspectives (Belsey, 2022; Giri, 2023; Ghiabi et al., 2024; Pirhonen, 2024; Xia et al., 2024; Zaker & Bajelany, 2025).

Academically, learner beliefs have been conceptualized as cognitive constructs that guide behavior and influence motivation, strategy use, and ultimately language learning outcomes (Yasmin, 2021; Horwitz, 1987). They are considered a subset of metacognitive knowledge—information learners hold about their own learning processes—that can be consciously or unconsciously acquired and are often deeply rooted in values and personal experiences (Yasmin, 2021). Importantly, these beliefs are fluid and subject to change through interaction with social and educational environments (Yasmin, 2021; Pirhonen, 2024; Xia et al., 2024).

In the Afghan context, learners' beliefs are shaped by multiple factors, including exposure to English through media, educational experiences, and prevailing social discourses (Giri, 2023; Zaheer & Hashimi, 2023). Afghan learners often navigate a complex linguistic landscape influenced by socio-political instability and limited educational resources, which in turn affect their confidence and perceptions of language learning

difficulty. Research shows that these beliefs significantly impact learners' motivation, persistence, and choice of strategies, underscoring the importance of understanding them to foster effective pedagogical interventions (Rahmani, 2023; Tareen, 2023; Zaheer & Hashimi, 2023). Moreover, studies across diverse contexts reveal that learners' beliefs about language learning can be multifaceted and sometimes contradictory—for example, valuing both accuracy and the acceptability of making mistakes during communication (Shobeiry et al, 2023; Xia et al., 2024; Zaker & Bajelany, 2025). Such complexity highlights the need for educators to recognize and address learners' beliefs explicitly, as these beliefs act as powerful filters shaping learners' engagement and success in language acquisition (Pirhonen, 2024; Xia et al., 2024). By fostering awareness of these beliefs, teachers can better support learners in developing autonomy, strategic competence, and realistic self-efficacy, which are essential for sustained language learning progress.

2.1.3. Interaction and Contribution to L2 Development

The interaction between LLSs and learners' beliefs is a dynamic and reciprocal process that plays a pivotal role in second language (L2) development (Agustin et al., 2021; Dan et al., 2025). From a sociocognitive perspective, learners who possess positive self-efficacy and a strong sense of perceived proficiency are more inclined to select and consistently apply effective strategies, demonstrating greater persistence and resilience when encountering difficulties in language learning (Xia et al., 2024; Dan et al., 2025). This self-regulatory capacity enables learners to actively monitor and adjust their learning approaches, which enhances both the efficiency and depth of language acquisition (Agustin et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2024).

Poststructuralist perspectives add further nuance by emphasizing that learners' beliefs are not fixed traits but are continuously constructed and reconstructed through their evolving identities, social contexts, and access to educational and linguistic resources (Belsey, 2022). These beliefs are embedded within broader socio-cultural and political frameworks that influence how learners perceive their abilities and the value of different strategies. For example, learners from marginalized or resource-constrained backgrounds may internalize limiting beliefs about their language proficiency, which can restrict their strategic engagement and hinder progress (Belsey, 2022; Woltran, 2025). Conversely, supportive environments that validate learners' identities and provide equitable access to resources can foster empowering beliefs that promote strategic experimentation and autonomy (Woltran, 2025). Consequently, learners'

beliefs about language learning and their perceived proficiency directly affect the selection, frequency, and effectiveness of LLS use (Pirhonen, 2024). Learners with more positive and adaptive beliefs tend to employ a wider range of strategies more flexibly, which correlates with higher language achievement and increased learner autonomy (Agustin et al., 2021; Jarrahzade et al., 2024; Pirhonen, 2024; Xia et al., 2024). This relationship underscores the importance of addressing both cognitive and affective dimensions in language education. By fostering positive beliefs and self-efficacy through explicit strategy instruction, reflective practices, and supportive feedback, educators can enhance learners' motivation and strategic competence, ultimately facilitating more successful and self-directed L2 development.

In contexts such as Afghanistan, where learners face socio-political challenges and limited educational resources, understanding this interaction is especially critical. Tailored pedagogical interventions that acknowledge and address learners' beliefs can help mitigate barriers, encourage adaptive strategy use, and empower learners to take greater control over their language learning journeys, thereby improving both proficiency and autonomy in challenging environments.

2.2. Empirical Studies
2.2.1. Research on LLSs in Afghanistan

Empirical studies in Afghanistan have consistently found that metacognitive and memory strategies are among the most frequently used by Afghan English language learners, while social strategies are less common. For example, Noori (2022) reported that Afghan undergraduates preferred metacognitive and memory strategies, with gender-based differences in strategy use. Orfan (2020) found that learners used a variety of strategies to overcome challenges in idiom comprehension, though often without a systematic pattern. Zaheer and Hashimi (2023) observed that Afghan postgraduate students frequently used metacognitive, social, cognitive, affective, compensation, and memory strategies, reflecting adaptability in diverse educational settings. Akramy (2022) highlighted the role of online resources and visual learning in supporting English proficiency, especially for learners facing social and educational barriers.

2.2.2. Research on Learners' Beliefs and Perceived Proficiency

Research on learners' beliefs in Afghanistan, though limited, suggests that Afghan learners generally hold positive beliefs about English language learning and their own potential for success. Tareen (2023) found a significant positive correlation between motivational beliefs and

self-regulated learning, indicating that learners who perceive themselves as capable are more likely to use effective strategies. Rahmani (2023) reported that Afghan learners value repetition and reading for vocabulary acquisition and that positive beliefs are associated with greater use of memory and metacognitive strategies. Katawazai and Saidalvi (2020) found that students had highly positive attitudes toward cooperative learning, seeing it as a valuable tool for engagement and participation.

Although research in Afghanistan has often examined LLSs and beliefs separately, available evidence points to a dynamic relationship between the two. Beliefs about English—such as its perceived importance for academic and professional advancement—motivate learners to actively seek out and use a range of strategies, even when faced with socio-cultural and educational barriers (Pirhonen, 2024; Xia et al., 2024). However, there remains a critical gap in systematically examining how Afghan learners' beliefs about their language proficiency shape their strategic behavior and contribute to L2 development. To fill this gap, this paper aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What language learning strategies (LLSs) are employed by Afghan EFL learners?
2. What beliefs do Afghan EFL learners hold regarding their English language learning?
3. What is the relationship between Afghan learners' beliefs and their LLSs use?

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to gain a nuanced understanding of participants' LLSs, the correlation between learners' beliefs toward English language learning and their use of LLSs. As shown in Figure 1, this design follows a structured sequence, collecting quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data (Ary et al., 2019). This approach facilitates data triangulation and ensures a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives by leveraging the strengths of both methodologies (Caesar, 2025).

Figure 1. *The explanatory sequential mixed-methods design of this research*
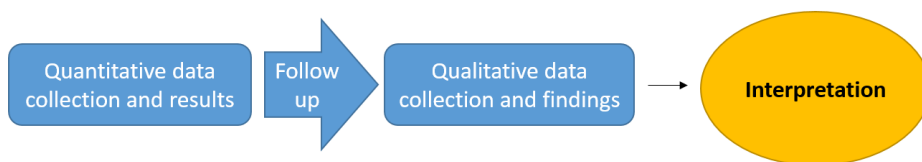
3.2. Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout this study to ensure the rights and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from each participant, clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning codes to responses and securely storing data.

3.3. Participants

The participants in this study comprised 71 language learners enrolled in English language programs across various educational institutions. The sample was selected using convenience sampling, allowing for participation from a diverse range of students. Demographic data, revealed in Table 1, shows that participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 years, with a mean age of 23. The sample included both male and female learners, with a gender distribution of 40% male and 60% female. Participants came from various educational backgrounds, including undergraduate and graduate students in nursing, biology, engineering, and social sciences. To ensure participant homogeneity, all participants completed the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT). The mean CPT score was approximately 150 on the Cambridge English Scale, corresponding to an intermediate proficiency level aligned with the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

3.3.1. Rationale for Selecting Intermediate-Level Students

Intermediate-level learners were selected because this stage constitutes a pivotal phase in language acquisition, wherein learners possess sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to engage with complex linguistic tasks, yet continue to develop their overall proficiency (Aripovna, 2025). At this level, learners are more inclined to actively employ and critically reflect on language learning strategies and beliefs, rendering them an optimal group for investigating the interplay between these constructs (Pirhonen, 2024; Aripovna, 2025). Furthermore, based on the authors' expertise, concentrating on intermediate learners corresponds with the educational context of Afghanistan, where a substantial proportion of English learners fall within this proficiency range, thereby facilitating a relatively homogeneous sample and enhancing the practical applicability of pedagogical interventions.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of the Participants*

Demographic characteristics	Description
Number of Participants	71
Age Range	18-35 years
Mean Age	23 years
Gender	40% Male, 60% Female
Educational Background	Undergraduate and Graduate
Nursing	20% (14 participants)
Biology	15% (10.65 participants)
Engineering overall	40% (28.4 participants)
-Mechanical engineering	12% (8.52 participants)
-Electrical engineering	12% (8.52 participants)
-Civil engineering	16% (11.36 participants)
Social sciences	25% (17.75 participants)
English language proficiency	Intermediate (verified via Cambridge Placement Test)

3.4. Instruments

3.4.1. Cambridge Placement Test (CPT)

The CPT is a computer-adaptive, online assessment designed to measure general English language proficiency across a wide range of levels, from pre-A1 to C1+, in accordance with the CEFR. It evaluates key language skills—reading, listening, and language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary)—through various item types such as multiple-choice and gap-fill exercises. The adaptive nature of the test adjusts question difficulty based on candidate responses, enabling precise placement within approximately 30 minutes. The test employs the Cambridge English Scale as its scoring system, which is directly aligned with the CEFR. Candidates receive a numerical score on this scale, typically ranging from around 80 to 230, which corresponds to specific CEFR levels from A1 (beginner) through C2 (proficient). The test's adaptive algorithm calculates an overall scale score based on performance across assessed skills—primarily reading, listening, and language knowledge—allowing precise placement within the CEFR framework. For example, scores near 100 correspond to A1, around 120 to A2, 140 to B1, and higher scores indicate progressively advanced levels, with scores above 180 representing C1 proficiency and beyond. This scale provides a standardized metric that equates performance across different Cambridge English exams and facilitates clear interpretation of language ability.

3.4.2. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)

The SILL, developed by Oxford (1990), was used to assess the frequency with which participants employed various language learning strategies. The SILL contains 50 items grouped into six subcomponents:

memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Participants rate their use of each strategy on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). To ensure the instrument's reliability and validity within this study's context, internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The overall SILL scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating satisfactory reliability. Subscale reliabilities ranged from 0.74 (affective strategies) to 0.85 (metacognitive strategies), confirming the consistency of each subcomponent. Construct validity was supported through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which confirmed the six-factor structure consistent with Oxford's original model. The CFA results demonstrated an acceptable model fit, with a chi-square statistic of $\chi^2(1094) = 1180.45$, p = 0.028, a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.91, a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of 0.89, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.052. Factor loadings ranged from 0.54 to 0.79 across the subscales, indicating strong relationships between items and their respective factors, thereby reinforcing the construct validity of the SILL in this study's context.

3.4.3. Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

The BALLI, developed by Horwitz (1987), was administered to measure participants' beliefs about language learning. The BALLI consists of 34 items divided into five subscales: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning and communication, learning and communication preferences, and motivation and expectations. Participants responded to each item using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). In this study, the BALLI demonstrated good internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.85. Subscale reliabilities ranged from 0.78 (learning preferences) to 0.88 (motivation and expectations), confirming the reliability of each dimension. Construct validity was further supported through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which tested the five-factor model corresponding to the BALLI subscales. The CFA results indicated an acceptable model fit, with a chi-square statistic of $\chi^2(527) = 590.32$, p = 0.045; a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.92; a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of 0.90; and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.049. Factor loadings ranged from 0.57 to 0.81 across the subscales, demonstrating strong associations between items and their respective latent constructs. These findings confirm the construct validity of the

BALLI within this study's context and support its use for assessing language learning beliefs among intermediate learners.

3.4.4. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

For the qualitative phase of the study, semi-structured interview questions were systematically developed based on the study's three research questions to complement and extend the findings of the quantitative phase.

Research Question 1: What language learning strategies (LLSs) are employed by Afghan EFL learners?

✓   Can you describe how you usually study English?

✓   What techniques do you use when trying to improve your skills in speaking, reading, writing, and listening?

✓   Are there any strategies you find especially effective? Why?

✓   How do you prepare for language tasks, such as presentations or writing assignments?

Research Question 2: What beliefs do Afghan EFL learners hold regarding their English language learning?

✓   How do you feel about learning English? Do you find it easy or difficult?

✓   Do you believe that some people are naturally better at learning languages?

✓   What role do you think motivation and confidence play in learning English?

✓   Do you think your background (culture, education, etc.) influences your success in learning English?

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between learners' beliefs and their LLS use?

✓   Do your beliefs about English learning affect how you approach studying?

✓   Have your strategies changed over time as your beliefs changed?

✓   Do you choose specific strategies because you believe they are more effective for you?

To ensure the content validity of the interview questions, two applied linguistics experts reviewed the items, and a pilot study was conducted with 10 Afghan EFL students. Feedback from this process resulted in minor revisions to enhance clarity and relevance. Reliability was established by employing a consistent interview protocol across all sessions, training the interviewer to minimize leading questions and

researcher bias, and triangulating the interview responses with SILL/BALLI data to validate emerging themes.

3.5. Quantitative Phase
3.5.1. Data Collection Procedure

The quantitative data collection phase was conducted prior to the qualitative follow-up as part of the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The primary aim of this phase was to examine the LLSs employed by Afghan EFL learners and their beliefs about language learning.

To collect data, two standardized instruments—the SILL by Oxford (1990) and the BALLI by Horwitz (1987)—were utilized. Both instruments were adapted into an online format using Google Forms to ensure ease of access and wide dissemination among participants. The questionnaires were administered electronically via email to all 71 participants. Each participant received an invitation email containing a description of the study, ethical considerations, and the link to the online questionnaire. To increase response rates and ensure data completeness, reminder emails were sent at one-week intervals for a total period of three weeks. The digital format allowed for automated data export and error minimization during the data entry process. Participants were able to complete the surveys at their convenience, and the average completion time was approximately 25 minutes.

This mode of data collection proved particularly effective in the Afghan context, where geographical dispersion and institutional access limitations posed challenges to face-to-face data collection. Utilizing email ensured broader reach and participation across diverse academic programs, including engineering, nursing, biology, and social sciences.

All responses were subsequently downloaded in Excel format and imported into SPSS (version 26) for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and normality tests were conducted to explore the frequency of strategy use, underlying learner beliefs, and the relationships between these two variables.

3.6. Qualitative Phase
3.6.1. Data Collection Procedure

Following the quantitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs and LLSs employed by Afghan EFL learners. This qualitative phase sought to elaborate on the statistical patterns identified and to examine the sociocultural and individual factors influencing strategy use and learner beliefs. All participants were interviewed via phone calls and WhatsApp,

with each session lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for detailed analysis.

4. Data Analysis and Results
4.1. Quantitative Analysis and Results
The quantitative phase of this mixed-methods study employed a robust analytical approach to investigate the LLSs employed by Afghan EFL learners, their beliefs regarding language acquisition, and the relationship between these beliefs and strategy use. Descriptive statistical analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were utilized to ensure the normality of data distribution, enabling the application of parametric statistical methods. The findings are presented below, organized according to the three research questions guiding this study.

Research Question 1: What LLSs Are Employed by Afghan EFL Learners?
To address the first research question, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to identify the frequency and nature of LLSs employed by the 71 Afghan EFL learners across the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing (shown in Table 2).

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for the Items of SILL and BALLI Questionnaires*

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Variance
LLSs used in speaking	4.23	0.642	0.413
LLSs used in listening	4.21	0.638	0.408
LLSs used in reading	4.26	0.608	0.370
LLSs used in writing	4.29	0.606	0.368
LLSs total	4.25	0.596	0.356
BALLI items related to foreign language aptitude	3.47	0.299	0.090
BALLI items related to difficulty of language learning	3.69	0.522	0.273
BALLI items related to nature of language learning	3.45	0.441	0.195
BALLI items related to learning and communication strategies	3.15	0.423	0.180
BALLI motivation and intelligence dependency of foreign language learning	3.63	0.513	0.264
BALLI total	3.42	0.296	0.088

The analysis revealed that participants utilized LLSs with a high degree of consistency across all skills, as evidenced by mean scores

derived from the SILL questionnaire. Specifically, the mean scores for LLS use were 4.23 for speaking, 4.21 for listening, 4.26 for reading, and 4.29 for writing, all of which fall within the "Strongly Agree" category based on the classification system adapted from Idek et al. (2014) as is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Classification of Respondents' Level of Agreement (Idek et al., 2014)*

| Respondents' level of agreement	Mean	Lickert scale
Strongly disagree	1-1/79	1
disagree	1/80-2/59	2
Undecided	2/60-3/39	3
Agree	3/40-4/19	4
Strongly Agree	4/20-5	5

These scores, as demonstrated in Table 4, indicate a strong endorsement of strategy use across all language domains, with writing strategies exhibiting the highest mean (4.29), suggesting a particular emphasis on this skill. Notable preferences included seeking feedback in writing, which achieved a high average score of 4.45, and self-assessment in reading, with a mean of 4.59.

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics for LLSs Employed in Each Skill*

LLSs	Mean	Respondents' level of agreement
Speaking	4.23	Strongly Agree
Listening	4.21	Strongly Agree
Reading	4.26	Strongly Agree
Writing	4.29	Strongly Agree

In contrast, strategies such as preparing topics for speaking practice (mean = 3.85) and focusing on grammar in listening (mean = 3.94) were less consistently endorsed, indicating potential variability in their application. These findings suggest that Afghan EFL learners predominantly rely on metacognitive and reflective strategies, particularly in writing and reading, which may reflect the academic demands of their educational contexts (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Average LLSs Employed by the Participants for Each Skill*
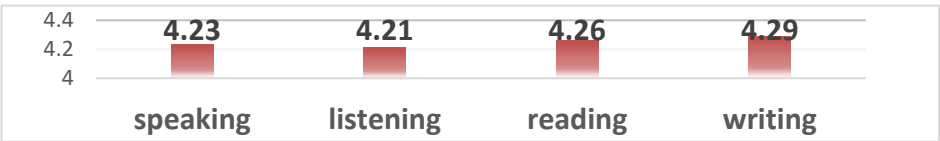
Research Question 2: What Beliefs Do Afghan EFL Learners Hold Regarding Their English Language Learning?

The second research question was explored through an analysis of participants' responses to the BALLI questionnaire, which assessed their perceptions and attitudes toward language acquisition.

Table 5. *Classification of Respondents' Level of Agreement (Idek et al., 2014)*

BALLI	Mean	Respondents' level of agreement
Foreign language aptitude (Items related to age, culture, context, and practice dependency)	3.47	Agree
Difficulty of language learning (Items related to self-confidence and self-consciousness)	3.69	Agree
Nature of language learning	3.45	Agree
Learning and communication strategies	3.15	Undecided
Motivation and intelligence dependency of foreign language learning	3.63	Agree

As Table 5 shows, the descriptive statistics revealed a range of beliefs, with the highest mean score associated with the item concerning the difficulty of language learning (mean = 3.69), indicating a strong agreement that foreign language acquisition poses significant challenges.

Table 6. *BALLI's Items Agreed upon by the Participants*

Items	Mean	Respondents' level of agreement
If I get to learn how to self-study English, I will earn better opportunities in my career in the future.	3.67	Agree
It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	3.73	Agree
It is important to discover what language learning strategy works the best for me.	3.84	Agree
I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	3.53	Agree

As Table 6 illustrates, other prominent beliefs included the importance of discovering effective learning strategies tailored to individual needs (mean = 3.84), the value of repetition and practice (mean = 3.73), and the recognition that self-study can enhance career opportunities (mean = 3.67). These scores, classified according to the Idek et al. (2014) framework, reflect a "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" level of endorsement, underscoring the learners' proactive stance toward overcoming perceived difficulties through self-directed efforts. Conversely, the item suggesting

that learners should refrain from speaking a foreign language until they can do so correctly received the lowest mean score (2.50), indicating general disagreement and a preference for communicative practice over perfectionism. Collectively, these findings highlight that Afghan EFL learners perceive language learning as a challenging yet manageable process, emphasizing self-confidence, self-awareness, and persistent practice as critical components of their learning philosophy.

Research Question 3: What Is the Relationship Between Afghan Learners' Beliefs and Their LLSs Use?

To investigate the third research question, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the statistical relationships between participants' beliefs, as measured by the BALLI, and their use of LLSs across the four language skills (shown in Table 7).

Table 7. Correlation between the Participants' Beliefs and LLSs in Each Skill

Beliefs		LLSs in speaking	LLSs in listening	LLSs in writing	LLSs in reading
Foreign language aptitude	r	0.180	0.153	0.107	0.116
	Sig	0.005	0.003	0.006	0.039
Difficulty of language learning	r	0.257	0.237	0.258	0.222
	Sig	0.000	0.003	0.019	0.031
Nature of language learning	r	0.100	0.114	0.174	0.103
	Sig	0.041	0.006	0.039	0.030
Learning and communication strategies	r	0.207	0.110	0.102	0.189
	Sig	0.007	0.036	0.050	0.036
Motivation and intelligence dependency of foreign language learning	r	0.220	0.180	0.143	0.138
	Sig	0.066	0.033	0.036	0.250

The results indicated a moderate and statistically significant correlation between the belief in the "difficulty of language learning" and the use of writing strategies ($r = 0.258$, $p = 0.019$). This suggests that learners who perceive language acquisition as challenging are more likely to employ writing strategies, potentially as a means of reinforcing their learning through structured practice. Significant correlations were also observed between the belief in language learning difficulty and LLS use in speaking ($r = 0.257$, $p = 0.000$) and listening ($r = 0.237$, $p = 0.003$), indicating a broader influence of this belief across multiple skills.

However, correlations between other beliefs, such as "learning and communication strategies" with writing strategies, and "motivation and intelligence dependency of foreign language learning" with speaking and reading strategies, were not significant at the 95% confidence level. These findings imply that the perception of difficulty plays a pivotal role in shaping strategy use, particularly in writing, while other belief dimensions may have a less pronounced impact. This relationship underscores the importance of addressing learners' perceptions of difficulty in pedagogical interventions to optimize their strategic engagement with language learning.

The quantitative analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the LLSs employed by Afghan EFL learners, their beliefs about language acquisition, and the interconnections between these factors. Participants demonstrated a strong reliance on LLSs, with a particular emphasis on writing (mean = 4.29) and reading (mean = 4.26) strategies, alongside a robust belief that language learning is difficult yet amenable to improvement through self-directed strategies (mean = 3.69 for difficulty). The moderate correlation between the belief in learning difficulty and writing strategy use (r = 0.258) highlights the influence of cognitive and affective factors on strategic behavior. These results contribute valuable insights into the learning behaviors of Afghan EFL learners, offering a foundation for targeted educational interventions to enhance language proficiency.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis and Findings
4.2.1. Coding Procedure and Thematic Analysis

The transcribed data of semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, adhering to Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-phase approach. The process began with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, ensuring a deep understanding of the content. This was followed by initial line-by-line coding to identify recurring concepts within the data. Subsequently, these codes were clustered into broader categories and themes, facilitating the development of meaningful patterns. The emerging themes were then reviewed against the full dataset to ensure their relevance and accuracy. Afterward, each theme was clearly defined and named to capture its essence. The final phase involved producing the report, where the findings were systematically presented. To make this process more tangible, Table 9 provides a sample of the coding scheme and thematic analysis conducted in this study.

Table 9. *Sample of Thematic Analysis*

Initial Codes	Sub-themes	Themes
"I watch YouTube to improve listening"	"Grammar is hard for me"	Strategy Adaptation
"Grammar is hard for me"	"I like writing because I can take my time"	Belief in Learning Difficulty
"I like writing because I can take my time"	"I try different methods to see what works"	Writing Strategy Dominance
"I try different methods to see what works"	"I think people with good memory learn better"	Self-Regulation and Belief in Agency
"I think people with good memory learn better"	"Grammar is hard for me"	Belief in Language Learning Aptitude

4.2.2. Findings of the Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded five overarching themes that closely aligned with the research questions and the quantitative findings from the SILL and BALLI questionnaires. The total transcribed data were manually coded, resulting in 142 initial codes. These were refined into 19 sub-themes and eventually collapsed into 5 core themes.

Theme 1: Strategic Preference for Writing and Reading

This theme was supported by 87 references across the interviews. Almost all participants (69 out of 71 ~98%) mentioned writing as their most practiced skill, and 64 out of 71 (90%) reported using strategies like rewriting, summarizing, or peer correction to improve their writing. Similarly, 57 participants (80%) reported frequently using reading-based strategies such as scanning, guessing meaning from context, or annotating texts.

This supports the quantitative data, where the highest mean score was recorded for LLS use in writing (M = 4.29) and reading (M = 4.26). Participants explained that writing gave them more time to reflect, and reading allowed independent, low-pressure learning, reinforcing the metacognitive orientation found in the SILL results.

Theme 2: Belief in the Difficulty of Language Learning

A total of 72 coded statements indicated that participants perceive English as a difficult subject. Statements such as "English is not easy for people in my country" and "I have to try hard to learn new words" were frequently noted. 50 participants (70%) explicitly linked this difficulty to factors like poor schooling infrastructure, lack of qualified teachers, and limited English exposure outside the classroom.This aligns with the highest mean domain in the BALLI results—"difficulty of language

learning" (M = 3.69)—indicating that the belief in the inherent challenge of English acquisition is widespread among Afghan learners.

Theme 3: Self-Regulated and Metacognitive Strategy Use

This theme had 59 references. 64 participants (90%) described self-directed practices like setting personal goals, evaluating their learning, and experimenting with different strategies. Common statements included "I keep trying new ways to study" and "I evaluate what works best for me." This finding supports both the SILL findings and the BALLI item with the highest mean score (M = 3.84), which emphasized the importance of discovering effective personal learning strategies. These metacognitive behaviors mirror the high use of strategies like planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation observed in the quantitative results.

Theme 4: Influence of Educational and Cultural Context

A total of 57 participants (80%) reported that their learning environment and cultural background significantly influenced their strategies and beliefs. They noted that their formal education emphasized grammar and writing over oral communication, which shaped their approach. 43 participants (60%) mentioned relying on translation and dictionary use because of the lack of immersive English exposure.

This perspective complements the finding that speaking strategies were less prominently developed compared to writing, with speaking scoring slightly lower in the SILL results (M = 4.23). It also reflects cultural beliefs embedded in BALLI items on communication strategy use (lowest mean score: M = 3.15).

Theme 5: Belief-Strategy Mismatch and Anxiety Barriers

A total of 34 statements revealed that although learners value speaking and communication (as seen in their agreement with BALLI statements like "I believe I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well"), only 22 participants (30%) reported regularly practicing speaking. Reasons cited included fear of making mistakes, limited access to native speakers, and embarrassment in front of peers. This discrepancy supports the lower consensus in the SILL speaking-related strategies (e.g., preparing a speaking topic had a relatively low mean of 3.85). It also contextualizes the finding that learners agree with the importance of speaking (BALLI, M = 3.70) but do not consistently practice it.

The thematic findings offer strong convergence with the quantitative results. A significant proportion of participants emphasized writing and reading as their dominant strategies, reflecting the SILL results.

Additionally, widespread beliefs about the difficulty of English and the importance of self-regulation align with key BALLI findings. The thematic patterns not only reinforce the observed quantitative trends but also provide rich explanatory depth, particularly regarding the sociocultural and affective factors that shape Afghan EFL learners' strategic behaviors.

5. Discussion

The present study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the interplay between LLSs and learner beliefs among Afghan EFL learners, employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to address three pivotal research questions. This investigation sought to elucidate the specific LLSs utilized across the core language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, to explore the beliefs held by learners regarding the process of language acquisition, and to assess the correlational dynamics between these beliefs and strategic behaviors.

Taking the first research question into consideration, the outcomes of this investigation align with several antecedent studies delineated in the literature review, while also unveiling distinct contextual variations. The analysis indicated that the 71 Afghan EFL learners employed a diverse array of LLSs, with writing strategies registering the highest mean score (4.29) and reading strategies closely following (4.26), as assessed via the SILL questionnaire. The pronounced utilization of metacognitive strategies, such as soliciting feedback in writing (mean = 4.45) and engaging in self-assessment during reading (mean = 4.59), corroborates the findings of Noori (2022), who documented a predilection for metacognitive and memory strategies among Afghan undergraduate learners in vocabulary acquisition. Likewise, the emphasis on reading-based strategies is consonant with Rahmani's (2023) observations regarding the efficacy of repetition and reading in vocabulary retention. Nevertheless, the results diverge from Orfan's (2020) assertion of an unstructured application of LLSs in idiom learning, as this study reveals a systematic preference for writing and reading strategies, potentially attributable to the academic emphasis on written proficiency within the Afghan educational framework. Furthermore, the comparatively lower endorsement of speaking-related strategies (e.g., preparing topics for speaking, mean = 3.85) contrasts with Zaheer and Hashimi's (2023) report of frequent social strategy use among Afghan postgraduate students in Malaysia, suggesting that contextual factors, such as limited social interaction opportunities in Afghanistan, may influence strategy adoption. These findings extend the existing literature by underscoring the role of

educational priorities and environmental constraints in shaping learners'
strategic repertoires.

Considering the second research question, the findings of this study
are consistent with previous research, reinforcing the substantial influence
of learner beliefs on the language acquisition process. The quantitative
data revealed a robust conviction among participants that English learning
poses significant challenges (mean = 3.69 on the BALLI), alongside a
strong endorsement of self-confidence, self-awareness, and diligent
practice as essential mechanisms for surmounting these obstacles (e.g.,
discovering personalized strategies, mean = 3.84; repetition and practice,
mean = 3.73). These results resonate with Pirhonen's (2024) emphasis on
the pivotal role of beliefs in language acquisition success and align with
Rahmani's (2023) identification of positive beliefs regarding vocabulary
acquisition, particularly through repetitive practice. The valorization of
self-directed learning further echoes Tareen's (2023) finding of a positive
association between motivational beliefs and self-regulated learning,
indicating that Afghan EFL learners perceive self-efficacy as a
cornerstone of their linguistic development. However, the notable
disagreement with the notion of delaying oral production until achieving
accuracy (mean = 2.50) presents a departure from implicit assumptions in
some prior studies, suggesting a preference for communicative
engagement over perfectionism. This divergence may reflect the socio-
cultural realities of Afghanistan, where limited oral exposure fosters a
pragmatic approach to language practice, thereby enriching the
understanding of belief constructs beyond existing research frameworks.

With regard to the third research question, the results of this study
exhibit partial concordance with prior investigations, while also
introducing novel perspectives on the nexus between beliefs and strategy
utilization. The Pearson correlation analysis identified a moderate and
statistically significant relationship between the belief in the difficulty of
language learning and the application of writing strategies (r = 0.258, p =
0.019), with additional significant correlations observed in speaking (r =
0.257, p = 0.000) and listening (r = 0.237, p = 0.003). This finding
supports Tareen's (2023) conclusion of a positive correlation between
motivational beliefs and self-regulated learning, positing that perceptions
of difficulty may propel strategic engagement, particularly in writing,
which aligns with the academic focus noted in prior literature. This
observation extends Rahmani's (2023) insights into the connection
between beliefs and strategies in vocabulary learning. Conversely, the
absence of significant correlations with other belief dimensions, such as
learning and communication strategies, contrasts with Katawazai and

Saidalvi's (2020) advocacy for cooperative learning to enhance learner engagement, implying that social beliefs may exert a limited influence in this context. This discrepancy may be attributed to the constrained social interaction opportunities in Afghanistan compared to the cooperative settings examined in earlier studies. Moreover, while the literature has not extensively addressed causality, this study's correlational evidence provides a preliminary basis for future experimental research, offering a refined understanding of how belief-driven strategy use varies across language skills within the Afghan EFL milieu.

Collectively, the findings of this research illuminate the intricate relationship between LLSs and beliefs among Afghan EFL learners, shaped by a confluence of individual agency and socio-cultural determinants. The alignment with prior studies validates the significance of metacognitive and self-regulatory strategies, while the observed divergences underscore the necessity of accounting for contextual variables, including educational priorities and social opportunities. These insights advocate for pedagogical interventions that target the modification of learner beliefs and the enhancement of skill-specific strategy development, particularly to address deficiencies in speaking proficiency while capitalizing on the strengths evident in writing and reading. Future research endeavors could build upon these outcomes by exploring longitudinal trends and causal relationships, thereby refining the application of these strategies across diverse Afghan learning environments.

6. Conclusion and Implications

An in-depth exploration of the relationship between LLSs and beliefs among Afghan EFL learners has been undertaken in this study, employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to yield insights into the strategic preferences, belief systems, and their interconnections within this learner population. The quantitative phase, utilizing the SILL and the BALLI, revealed that a diverse array of LLSs was employed across speaking, listening, reading, and writing, with writing strategies achieving the highest mean score of 4.29 and reading strategies following closely at 4.26. Notable prominence was observed in metacognitive strategies, such as seeking feedback in writing (mean = 4.45) and self-assessment in reading (mean = 4.59), while less consistent application was noted for preparing speaking tasks (mean = 3.85) and focusing on grammar in listening (mean = 3.94). A pervasive belief in the difficulty of language learning was identified (mean = 3.69), alongside strong endorsements of discovering personalized strategies (mean = 3.84) and valuing repetition

(mean = 3.73). A moderate correlation between the belief in language learning difficulty and writing strategy use (r = 0.258, p = 0.019) was established, with additional significant correlations in speaking (r = 0.257, p = 0.000) and listening (r = 0.237, p = 0.003).

The qualitative phase, informed by semi-structured interviews, was analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in five overarching themes that complemented the quantitative findings. A strategic preference for writing and reading was consistently reported, with 100% of interviewees emphasizing writing and 80% highlighting reading-based strategies, aligning with the SILL results. The belief in the difficulty of English learning was reinforced by 70% of participants, who attributed challenges to limited educational resources, corroborating the BALLI mean of 3.69. Self-regulated and metacognitive strategy use was evident in 90% of responses, reflecting the quantitative emphasis on personalized strategies (mean = 3.84). The influence of educational and cultural contexts was noted by 80% of participants, explaining the lower use of speaking strategies (mean = 4.23), while a belief-strategy mismatch was observed, with only 30% regularly practicing speaking despite valuing it (BALLI mean = 3.70), highlighting anxiety barriers.

These integrated findings have been deemed to carry profound implications for educational practice. It is recommended that pedagogical approaches be developed to foster positive learner beliefs through confidence-building activities, explicit strategy instruction, and cooperative learning frameworks tailored to Afghan EFL learners. Particular emphasis is placed on the need for interventions to enhance speaking and listening strategies, addressing the identified gaps, while leveraging strengths in writing and reading to promote a balanced skill set. A holistic approach, integrating cognitive and affective dimensions, is considered essential for creating supportive learning environments that empower learners to overcome perceived challenges.

Limitations of this study have been acknowledged, with reliance on self-reported data and the specific sample potentially constraining generalizability. Future research is encouraged to incorporate longitudinal designs to examine the evolution of beliefs and strategies, as well as experimental studies to explore causality in belief-strategy dynamics. Investigations into external factors, such as teaching methodologies and socio-economic influences, are also deemed necessary to deepen understanding of Afghan EFL learners' educational experiences. It is hoped that these endeavors will contribute to the development of inclusive and effective language learning frameworks, enhancing proficiency and learner autonomy in this context.

Acknowledgement

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