EXPLORING THE ROLE OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE RECEPTIVE SKILLS AND LEARNING STRATEGY USAGE IN THE ABILITY TO ACQUIRE AND APPLY KNOWLEDGE AT THE BEGINNING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:
This study investigates the intricate relationship between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) receptive skills, learning strategy usage, and the acquisition and application of knowledge among students at the outset of higher education. The importance of EFL proficiency in higher education settings, particularly for non-native English speakers, cannot be overstated, as it forms the foundation for understanding lectures, academic texts, and engaging in scholarly discourse. Through a comprehensive review of literature, this research synthesizes existing knowledge and identifies gaps in understanding the impact of EFL receptive skills and learning strategies on academic performance. Methodologically, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys, interviews, and observations to gather data from participants. Findings reveal significant correlations between proficiency in EFL receptive skills, effective learning strategy usage, and the ability to both acquire and apply knowledge in academic contexts. Implications of these findings for language teaching and learning practices in higher education are discussed, highlighting the need for tailored instructional approaches that promote the development of both receptive skills and strategic competence. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between language proficiency, learning strategies, and academic success, offering insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers alike.

Keywords: EFL, receptive skills, language proficiency, cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical abilities, skimming, scanning, cognitive, metacognitive, socio-affective, retention, rehearsal, elaboration, organization, decoding skills, background knowledge, scaffolding, multiple-choice, MicroDYN approach, PISA, Likert scale, eDia online platform, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), Chi-square test, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Normed Fit Index (NFI), exogenous and endogenous constructs,

Introduction to the Importance of EFL Skills

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency has become increasingly essential in today's globalized world, particularly in the realm of higher education. As universities attract a diverse cohort of students from various linguistic backgrounds, the ability to effectively comprehend and communicate in English is crucial for academic success. Proficiency in EFL not only facilitates access to a wealth of knowledge and resources but also fosters cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. This introduction explores the importance of EFL skills in higher education, focusing on the significance of receptive skills—listening and reading—in academic contexts.

EFL proficiency is a fundamental prerequisite for non-native English speakers entering higher education institutions where English serves as the medium of instruction. Mastery of English receptive skills, including listening and reading comprehension, is paramount for students to engage with academic content, participate in discussions, and produce written assignments effectively (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Without adequate proficiency in these skills, students may encounter barriers to accessing course materials, understanding lectures, and engaging in scholarly discourse, ultimately hindering their academic progress (García-López, 2016).

Moreover, the importance of EFL skills extends beyond academic success to broader societal and professional realms. In an increasingly interconnected world, proficiency in English facilitates communication and collaboration across international borders, opening up opportunities for global networking, employment, and cultural exchange (Crystal, 2003). Employers in diverse fields prioritize candidates with strong English language skills, recognizing the ability to communicate fluently as a valuable asset in today's multicultural workplaces (Graddol, 2006).

Furthermore, the acquisition and development of EFL skills contribute to the cultivation of critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical abilities among students (Cook, 2008). Engaging with English-language academic texts challenges students to interpret complex ideas, evaluate evidence, and construct coherent arguments, thus enhancing cognitive skills essential for academic and professional success (Meara, 2005).

In summary, proficiency in English as a Foreign Language, particularly in receptive skills such as listening and reading, is indispensable for students embarking on their journey through higher education. Beyond academic endeavors, EFL proficiency facilitates intercultural communication, enhances employability, and fosters intellectual growth. Recognizing the significance of EFL skills lays the groundwork for implementing effective language teaching and learning strategies in higher education

contexts, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and professionally.

Definition of Receptive Skills and Learning Strategies

Receptive skills refer to the ability to comprehend and interpret language input received through listening or reading (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In language learning contexts, receptive skills encompass listening comprehension and reading comprehension, both of which are essential for understanding spoken discourse and written texts, respectively.

Listening comprehension involves the processing of auditory information, including speech, sounds, and intonation patterns, to derive meaning and extract relevant information (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Effective listening comprehension entails not only decoding linguistic input but also making inferences, anticipating content, and monitoring comprehension for understanding and retention (Graham & Macaro, 2008).

Reading comprehension, on the other hand, involves the interpretation and understanding of written texts, ranging from simple narratives to complex academic articles (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Proficient readers engage in various cognitive processes, such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and summarizing, to construct meaning from the text and extract relevant information (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Learning strategies, on the other hand, refer to the conscious and deliberate actions or techniques employed by learners to enhance their language acquisition and learning process (Oxford, 1990). Learning strategies encompass a wide range of cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective techniques used by learners to regulate their learning, monitor their progress, and facilitate understanding and retention of new information (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

Cognitive strategies involve mental processes such as rehearsal, elaboration, and organization, which aid in the encoding and storage of new language material (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Metacognitive strategies, on the other hand, involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning process, allowing learners to regulate their cognitive activities and adapt their learning strategies as needed (Flavell, 1979). Socio-affective strategies pertain to the management of emotions, motivation, and social interactions in the learning context, influencing learners' attitudes, beliefs, and engagement with the language learning process (Oxford, 1990). In summary, receptive skills encompass listening comprehension and reading comprehension, while learning strategies encompass cognitive, metacognitive, and

socio-affective techniques employed by learners to facilitate language acquisition and learning.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have delved into the intricate relationship between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) receptive skills, learning strategies, and academic performance in higher education contexts. This review synthesizes existing research to elucidate how these skills and strategies contribute to knowledge acquisition and application among students.

EFL Receptive Skills and Academic Performance:

Proficiency in EFL receptive skills, encompassing listening and reading comprehension, has been consistently linked to academic success in higher education. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) emphasize the pivotal role of effective listening comprehension in understanding lectures, participating in class discussions, and comprehending spoken academic discourse. Similarly, Graham and Macaro (2008) highlight the significance of proficient reading comprehension for comprehending academic texts, synthesizing information, and critically evaluating scholarly arguments. These studies underscore the importance of EFL receptive skills as foundational competencies that enable students to engage with academic content across disciplines.

Learning Strategies and Academic Performance:

Research on learning strategies has demonstrated their positive impact on EFL learners' academic performance in higher education settings. Oxford (1990) categorizes learning strategies into cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies, each playing a unique role in facilitating language acquisition and learning. Cognitive strategies, such as rehearsal and elaboration, aid in the encoding and retention of new language material (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Metacognitive strategies, such as planning and monitoring, enable learners to regulate their learning process, set goals, and evaluate their progress (Flavell, 1979). Socio-affective strategies, including seeking social support and managing anxiety, influence learners' motivation, attitudes, and engagement with the learning process (Oxford, 1990).

Contributions to Knowledge Acquisition and Application:

Studies by Chamot and O'Malley (1994) and Graham and Macaro (2008) have demonstrated the positive impact of strategic language learning on knowledge acquisition and application in higher education. Additionally, research by Anderson and Pearson (1984) has shown that skilled readers employ a range of cognitive strategies, such as predicting, summarizing, and making inferences, to extract meaning from written texts effectively, thus enhancing their ability to apply acquired knowledge in academic contexts.

In summary, existing research underscores the integral role of EFL receptive skills and learning strategies in academic performance and knowledge acquisition among higher education students. Proficiency in receptive skills and strategic language learning facilitates students' engagement with academic content, participation in scholarly discourse, and application of acquired knowledge across disciplines.

Andrea Magyar, Anita Habók and Gyöngyvér Molnár's Research

Andrea Magyar, Anita Habók, and Gyöngyvér Molnár investigated the initial progress of full-time first-year students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), focusing on their reading and listening skills, as well as their ability to acquire and apply knowledge, which reflects problem-solving skills and strategy utilization. They also explored the interconnectedness of these aspects in successful EFL learning. Their study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the proficiency level of first-year full-time students in EFL reading and listening, knowledge acquisition, and application, and what learning strategies do they predominantly employ?

2. How are the EFL reading, listening, knowledge acquisition, and application of first-year full-time students related to their use of learning strategies?

3. What impact do students' EFL reading and listening skills have on their ability to acquire knowledge, apply it, and utilize learning strategies?

Materials and methods
Participants

The study encompassed a comprehensive sample drawn from 11 faculties within a university situated in southern Hungary. A total of 1,257 students took part in the assessment, with 42.3% representing the male cohort (N=532). Tailored for full-time enrollment, this research constituted a segment of a broader institutional longitudinal endeavor. Initial-year students were extended invitations to engage in the institutional evaluation, which transpired at the onset of their inaugural term.

Participation was voluntary, and attendees were accorded one credit upon completion. Preliminary to the data collection phase, students were briefed on the principal aim of the study and apprised of their anticipated tasks involving tests and surveys. Following the data compilation, participants received comprehensive, personalized feedback in the form of a 15-page PDF document, delineating their performance benchmarks vis-à-vis faculty and university standards.

Instruments

The study's objective is to assess the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency, knowledge acquisition, and application skills of first-year university students as indicators of problem-solving abilities and learning strategies. Task construction ensured varying difficulty levels. Listening tasks involved authentic audio texts played twice via headphones, where students selected correct multiple-choice answers. Reading tasks comprised filling gaps in texts with nouns, verbs, adverbs, or adjectives. These tasks spanned B1- and B2-level competencies. Reliability analysis indicated high reliability for both reading and listening tests.

To gauge knowledge acquisition and application, a MicroDYN approach within complex problem-solving contexts was employed. This approach typically utilizes computer simulations or problem scenarios with interrelated variables. The problem-solving process comprised two phases: knowledge acquisition and application. In the acquisition phase, participants comprehended system workings, identified variable interconnections, and detected changes through manipulations, employing combinational and classification operations. The application phase involved applying acquired knowledge to attain target output variable states. Empirical evidence supports the efficacy of complex scenarios for assessing knowledge acquisition and application.

The test comprised 20 items with varied difficulty, requiring no prior factual knowledge but focusing on exploration and learning in novel situations and effective application of acquired knowledge. Both knowledge acquisition and application items demonstrated reliability within the university sample **(Table 1).**

TABLE 1 | Internal consistency (CRB) of reading, listening, knowledge acquisition and knowledge application items.

Cognitive tasks	CRB α
Listening tasks (20 items)	0.879
Reading tasks (20 items)	0.962
Knowledge acquisition (10 items)	0.836
Knowledge application (10 items)	0.832

Additionally, a questionnaire adapted from PISA studies assessed learning strategies, including elaboration, memorization, and control strategies, on a Likert scale. Elaboration strategies involved linking new information to prior knowledge and assessing its real-world relevance. Memorization strategies assessed the frequency of memorization and recitation. Control strategies examined efforts to assess existing knowledge, learning, and understanding gaps, and seeking new information. The measurement tools exhibited reliable performance **(Table 2)**.

TABLE 2 | Internal consistency reliability (CRB) for strategy fields.

Strategy fields	CRB α
Elaboration	0.601
Memorization	0.645
Control	0.689

Design and Procedure

Following the briefing on the research objectives, students were given the opportunity to register and select a measurement date. The assessments were conducted via the eDia online platform (Csapó and Molnár, 2019). The university information center served as the data collection venue, accommodating up to 150 students simultaneously. Trained supervisors oversaw the measurement sessions and addressed student queries. Each measurement tool was allotted a duration of sixty minutes, allowing students to complete both tools in a single session (2×60 min). Immediate feedback on their results was provided post-assessment. Additionally, two weeks after data collection, students received detailed personalized feedback on their knowledge and skills, highlighting areas for improvement and strengths, along with a comparison to their peers' performance. For each student, a comprehensive report was generated, delineating their lowest and highest achievements alongside the sample's average performance in each measured field.

Data Analyses

Initially, classical test analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 to assess internal consistency reliability, as well as to compute mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and correlations. Subsequently, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to scrutinize the relationships among EFL reading and listening skills, knowledge acquisition, knowledge application as a proxy for problem-solving, and utilization of learning strategies.

The model was evaluated using the IBM AMOS 24.0 software package, with fit indices such as the Chi-square test, comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and normed fit index (NFI). CFI, TLI, and NFI values range from 0 to 1, with a threshold of 0.90 indicating an acceptable model fit. For RMSEA, lower values signify a better model fit, with 0.06 or less considered indicative of good fit, though 0.08 or less is still deemed acceptable (Kline, 2015)[1].

Results
Descriptive Analysis

Means were computed for each type of task, and the results are outlined in **Table 3**, along with standard deviations. The mean scores for cognitive tasks ranged from 73 to 36%, indicating challenges encountered by students in reading tasks and knowledge application. In terms of strategy utilization, control strategies were the most frequently employed by students, with consistent trends observed across different strategies. Notably, students rated statements pertaining to recalling and connecting prior knowledge with new information the highest (M=4.27), followed closely by assessing the acquisition of essential information (M=4.23). Conversely, memorization strategies received the lowest rating, suggesting a tendency among students to focus on learning material selectively rather than memorizing it in its entirety **(Figure 1)**.

TABLE 3 | Means for strategy fields.

Fields	M (%p)	SD
Cognitive tasks		
Listening task	73	18
Reading tasks	55	29
Knowledge acquisition	55	26
Knowledge application	36	25
Strategies		
Elaboration	69	17
Memorization	69	19
Control	75	16

[1] Kline, R. B. (2015). Principles and Practice of Structural Equation Modeling. 4th Edn. New York, NY: Guilford.

FIGURE 1 | Frequencies of students' responses.
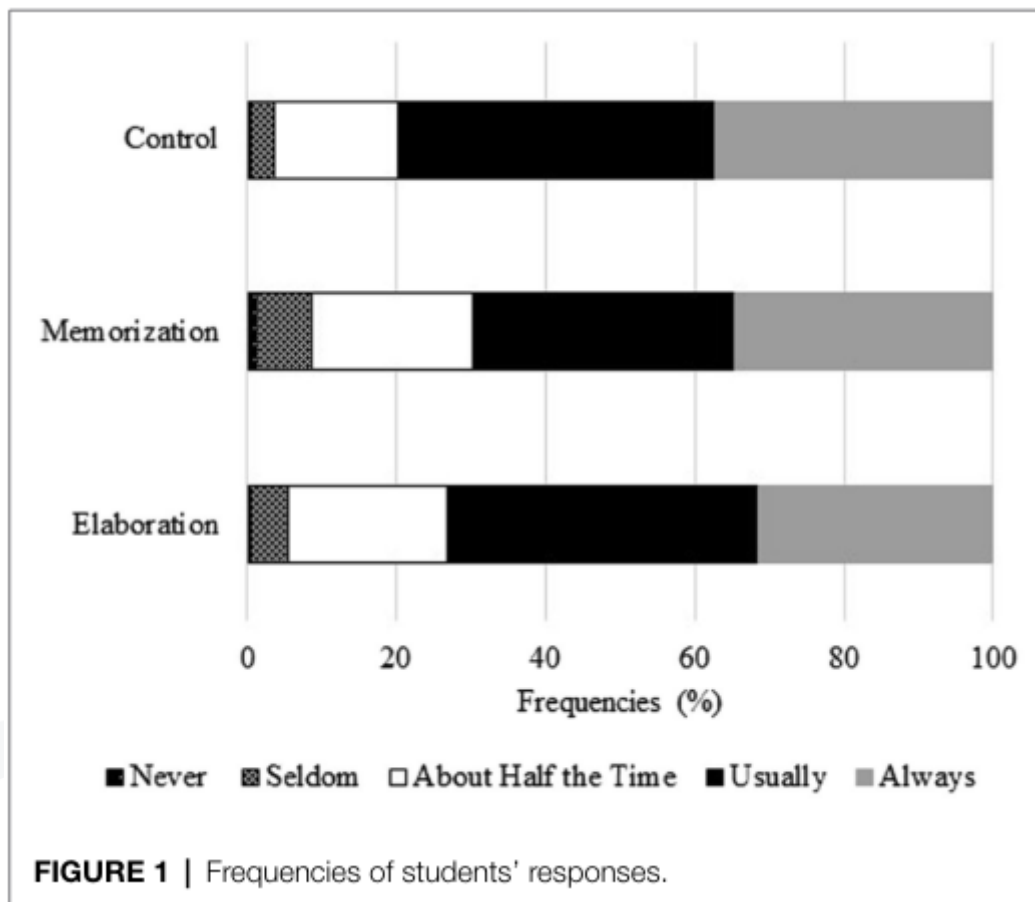
Further analysis of frequencies offered a detailed insight into students' strategy utilization. Overall, it can be inferred that a significant portion of the sample habitually incorporates learning strategies into their academic endeavors, with over 50% reporting frequent utilization of these strategies.

Multivariate Analysis

The correlation analyses were conducted to explore the relationships among reading and listening skills, knowledge acquisition, knowledge application, and learning strategies. Significant correlation coefficients were observed across most cases (ranging from r=0.75 to r=-0.26), with the strongest correlations found between reading and listening variables. In terms of strategy use, the highest correlation was noted between elaboration and control strategies (r=0.42), while memorization strategies displayed significant positive correlations with control (r=0.38) and elaboration (r=0.17) strategies. However, memorization strategies exhibited significant negative correlations (ranging from r=-0.26 to r=-0.11) with other factors. Moderate correlations were observed between receptive skills and knowledge acquisition/application skills (r=0.27−0.13; **Table 4**).\

Table 4. Correlations between language skills, levels of knowledge acquisition, and knowledge application and learning strategies.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.	Listening task	1						
2.	Reading tasks	0.75	1					
3.	Knowledge acquisition	0.27	0.25	1				
4.	Knowledge application	0.13	0.13	0.43	1			
5.	Elaboration	0.08	0.12	0.09	0.08	1		
6.	Memorization	-0.11	-0.11	-0.26	-0.15	0.17	1	
7.	Control	n.s.	n.s	n.s.	n.s	0.42	0.38	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

To consolidate the findings and examine significant correlations, a structural model incorporating two exogenous constructs (reading and listening skills) and five endogenous constructs (learning strategies and knowledge acquisition/application factors) was constructed. Nine structural relationships were identified, including the direct effects of reading skills on memorization and elaboration strategies, the impact of listening skills on knowledge acquisition/application, and the influence of memorization and elaboration strategies on both knowledge acquisition and application. The model exhibited satisfactory fit indices (Chi-square=9.541; d=9; p=0.389; CFI=1.000; TLI=0.999; NFI=0.995; RMSEA=0.007). Standardized estimates on regression paths are depicted in **Figure 2**, with positive coefficients indicating positive directions. Negative coefficients from knowledge acquisition denote an adverse effect on the memorization strategy. All paths were significant at $p<0.05$.
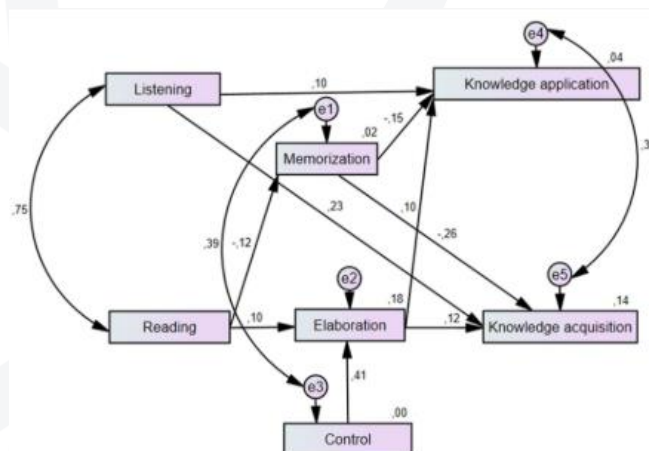
Figure 2. Structural model for English as a foreign language (EFL) receptive skill, learning strategy use, and knowledge acquisition and application.

The structural equation model revealed varying predictive powers of different skills on each other. Reading knowledge predicted memorization ($\beta=-0.12$) and elaboration ($\beta=0.03$) strategies, while listening knowledge significantly predicted knowledge acquisition ($\beta=0.23$) and application ($\beta=0.10$). Memorization predicted knowledge application ($\beta=-0.15$) and acquisition ($\beta=-0.26$), while elaboration had similar effects on knowledge application ($\beta=0.10$) and acquisition ($\beta=0.12$). Control strategies notably influenced themselves ($\beta=0.41$). Double-headed arrows denote strong correlations between listening and reading, knowledge acquisition and application, and memorization and elaboration strategies.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The study employed descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading and listening skills, knowledge acquisition, knowledge application, and learning strategy utilization among first-year undergraduate students. The primary outcome of the research is twofold: firstly, it corroborates findings from prior studies and secondly, it unveils novel relationships among the investigated constructs.

The findings underscore the close interrelation between language learning, knowledge acquisition, and knowledge application, emphasizing the crucial role of deliberate training in educational environments. The strong correlation between EFL receptive skills and other language competencies implies that language learning not only facilitates communication but also enhances the development of broader skills and competencies. Additionally, 21st-century skills, such as knowledge acquisition and application, serve as foundational elements across various domains, highlighting their significance in educational contexts.

Moreover, the study reinforces the importance of teaching learning strategies, as they directly impact knowledge acquisition and application, indicative of problem-solving abilities. Notably, the results indicate that rote memorization adversely affects both knowledge acquisition and application skills.

Pedagogically, the research underscores the significance of incorporating learning strategies into language learning classrooms and emphasizes the role of knowledge acquisition and application in the language learning process. Educators can glean insights into the selection and application of effective strategies in foreign language exercises and their transferability to other academic pursuits.

Furthermore, the findings pave the way for future investigations, not only in higher education but also in secondary and primary school settings. Future research avenues

may extend to exploring productive language skills, such as writing and speaking, as well as other cognitive domains like mathematical reasoning. Additionally, the role of affective factors, including attitudes towards language learning and motivational aspects, warrants further exploration.

Limitations

Several limitations can be noticed in the research study, and they are as follows:

1.   The sample exclusively comprised first-year undergraduate students from a single institution, thus limiting the generalizability of findings.

2.   The reading and listening tasks were designed with multiple-choice answers and maintained a consistent structure across both domains, facilitating immediate task evaluation and feedback provision. However, this approach may not adequately capture the abilities of students who excel in alternative task formats, such as essay tasks.

3.   The learning strategy questionnaire contained a limited number of statements, potentially constraining the depth of measurement for these constructs.

4.   Students might have perceived that their responses could influence their university studies, possibly leading to higher ratings of their strategy utilization, even though their responses were solely for research purposes.

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