Self-Assessment and Strategy Utilization: Investigating English Grammar Learning Among Indonesian EFL Students

Agus Rianto

Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Borneo Tarakan, East Kalimantan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT : This study explores Indonesian EFL learners' self-perceived grammatical competence and their reported use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies in the context of TOEFL ITP preparation. Grounded in theories of learner cognition and metacognitive regulation, the study addresses a lack of empirical evidence on how learners conceptualise grammatical ability and manage grammar learning in high-stakes assessment contexts. Adopting a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from undergraduate EFL learners through validated self-report questionnaires measuring perceived grammatical competence and metacognitive grammar learning strategies. The data were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures to identify patterns in learners' perceptions and strategy use. The findings indicate that learners generally reported moderate to high levels of self-perceived grammatical competence alongside frequent use of metacognitive strategies, particularly in planning, monitoring, and evaluation of grammar learning. These results highlight the prominence of metacognitive regulation in learners' grammar learning experiences and underscore the role of self-perception in assessment-oriented EFL contexts. The study contributes to applied linguistics research by providing context-specific empirical insights into grammar learning and metacognition within a Southeast Asian EFL setting.

KEYWORDS: *self-perceived grammatical competence; grammar learning; metacognitive strategies; TOEFL ITP; Indonesian EFL learners*

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammatical competence has long been recognised as a foundational component of second and foreign language proficiency and a critical contributor to academic literacy development (Ellis, 2008; Schmitt, 2007; Ur, 2012). Within applied linguistics, grammar is no longer conceptualised merely as a static system of formal rules but as a dynamic resource that learners must interpret, internalise, and deploy strategically in communicative and assessment contexts. As such, grammatical competence is increasingly understood not only in terms of objective linguistic knowledge but also in relation to learners' perceptions of their own abilities, which shape engagement, persistence, and self-regulatory behaviour during language learning and testing (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 2002; Lockley, 2013).

From a social cognitive perspective, learners' self-perceptions of competence influence how they approach cognitively demanding tasks, manage learning challenges, and sustain effort under pressure (Bandura, 1997). In language learning, self-perceived competence has been shown to affect motivation, strategy use, and performance across a range of skills and contexts (Mills et al., 2007; Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Lockley, 2013). When learners perceive themselves as grammatically competent, they are more likely to engage actively with complex structures, persist in the face of difficulty, and employ strategies to monitor and regulate their learning. Conversely, low perceived competence may lead to avoidance, surface-level processing, or reliance on rote memorisation, particularly in test-oriented environments.

The role of grammatical competence becomes especially salient in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Indonesia, where opportunities for authentic language use outside formal instruction are limited. English learning in Indonesia is largely classroom-based and examination-driven, with grammar occupying a central position in curricula and assessment practices (Marcellino, 2015; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). Within this context, learners' success is often evaluated through standardised proficiency tests that prioritise accuracy, form recognition, and analytical processing of language structures. As a result, grammatical knowledge is frequently foregrounded as both a learning objective and a benchmark of proficiency.

One of the most widely used standardised assessments in Indonesian higher education is the Test of English as a Foreign Language Institutional Testing Program (TOEFL ITP). The TOEFL ITP assesses learners' English proficiency through listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and grammatical knowledge, the latter operationalised through the Structure and Written Expression sections (Alderson et al., 1995; Phillips,

2001; ETS, 2022). These sections require test-takers to identify grammatical relationships, detect structural errors, and apply explicit knowledge of syntax and morphology under strict time constraints. Performance in these sections therefore depends not only on linguistic competence but also on learners' ability to regulate cognitive processes, manage test demands, and deploy effective learning strategies during preparation.

Despite the prominence of grammar in both instruction and assessment, research on grammar learning in the Indonesian EFL context has tended to focus on pedagogical techniques, error patterns, or test outcomes (Marcellino, 2015; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011; Akmal et al., 2020). While such studies have contributed valuable insights into instructional challenges and performance trends, they have paid comparatively less attention to learners' internal perceptions of grammatical competence. This omission is noteworthy, given substantial evidence from applied linguistics and educational psychology indicating that learners' self-perceptions play a crucial role in shaping motivation, strategic engagement, and learning outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 2002; Mills et al., 2007).

In parallel with self-perceived competence, metacognitive learning strategies have been identified as a key factor in successful language learning. Metacognition refers to learners' awareness of their own cognitive processes and their ability to regulate learning through planning, monitoring, and evaluation (Flavell, 1979; Veenman et al., 2006). In second language acquisition research, metacognitive strategies have been shown to support deeper processing, more efficient learning, and greater learner autonomy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). Empirical studies have documented the role of metacognitive strategies in reading, writing, and listening, demonstrating their contribution to comprehension, accuracy, and performance (Zhang, 2010; Pawlak, 2024).

However, despite this growing body of research, metacognitive strategy use in grammar learning—particularly within test-oriented EFL contexts—remains underexplored. Grammar learning is often assumed to rely primarily on cognitive or memory-based strategies, with less attention paid to learners' regulatory practices when engaging with grammatical structures (Pawlak, 2009, 204). In high-stakes assessment contexts such as TOEFL preparation, learners are required to manage time, monitor accuracy, and evaluate their understanding of grammatical rules, all of which involve metacognitive control. Yet empirical investigations that explicitly examine metacognitive grammar learning strategies in relation to perceived grammatical competence are still limited, especially in Southeast Asian EFL settings.

The Indonesian context offers a particularly relevant setting for examining these issues. Previous research suggests that EFL learners in exam-oriented environments may prioritise short-term performance goals over systematic regulation of learning processes (Zuhairi & Mistar, 2023; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). This tendency raises important questions about how learners perceive their grammatical abilities and how these perceptions interact with their use of metacognitive strategies during test preparation. Understanding this relationship is crucial not only for theoretical models of grammar learning but also for broader discussions of learner agency and self-regulation in applied linguistics.

Taken together, existing research reveals two interrelated gaps. First, while grammatical competence has been widely studied from instructional and performance-based perspectives, learners' self-perceived grammatical competence—particularly in relation to standardised grammar assessment—has received limited empirical attention in the Indonesian EFL context. Second, although metacognitive strategies are well established as a key component of effective language learning, their role in grammar learning and test preparation remains insufficiently examined. More importantly, few studies have explored the intersection between self-perceived grammatical competence and metacognitive grammar learning strategies, leaving unanswered questions about how learners' beliefs and regulatory practices co-occur in assessment-driven environments.

Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing applied linguistics research on grammar learning and assessment. By foregrounding learners' perceptions and strategic behaviour, researchers can move beyond surface-level descriptions of performance and gain insight into the cognitive and affective dimensions of grammar learning. Such an approach aligns with contemporary perspectives in applied linguistics that emphasise learner cognition, agency, and self-regulation as central to understanding language learning processes (Ellis, 2008; Oxford, 2017; Pawlak, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate Indonesian EFL learners' self-perceived grammatical competence in relation to the Structure and Written Expression sections of the TOEFL ITP and to examine their use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies during test preparation. Specifically, the study seeks to (1) identify patterns of learners' perceived grammatical competence across key grammatical domains assessed in the TOEFL ITP, (2) examine the frequency and nature of metacognitive grammar learning strategies employed by learners, and (3) explore the relationship between perceived grammatical competence and metacognitive strategy use within a test-oriented EFL context. By addressing these aims, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of grammar learning as a cognitively and strategically mediated process and offers empirical insights relevant to applied linguistics research on language assessment and learner self-regulation in Southeast Asian EFL contexts.

II.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE
SELF-PERCEIVED GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNING

Self-perceived grammatical competence refers to learners' subjective evaluations of their ability to understand, apply, and manipulate grammatical structures in second or foreign language use (Bandura, 1997; Lockley, 2013; Tilfarlioglu & Cinkara, 2020). Rather than reflecting objective linguistic knowledge alone, this construct captures learners' beliefs about their grammatical capabilities, which shape how they engage with learning tasks and respond to linguistic challenges. Within applied linguistics, such perceptions are increasingly recognised as a critical component of learner cognition, mediating the relationship between instructional input and observable performance.

The concept of self-perceived grammatical competence is theoretically grounded in social cognitive theory, particularly Bandura's (1997) notion of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capacity to organise and execute actions required to achieve specific goals. In language learning contexts, self-efficacy beliefs influence learners' motivation, task persistence, and strategic engagement (Zimmerman, 2002). When applied to grammar learning, self-efficacy manifests as learners' confidence in handling grammatical rules, recognising patterns, and resolving structural ambiguities during comprehension and production. Importantly, such beliefs are not static but develop through prior learning experiences, feedback, and perceived success or failure.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that learners with higher self-perceived competence are more likely to engage with linguistically demanding tasks and to persist when encountering difficulty. Mills, Pajares, and Herron (2007), for example, found that language learners' self-efficacy beliefs were significantly related to achievement and motivation, even when controlling for prior proficiency. Similarly, Hsieh and Kang (2010) reported that learners who perceived themselves as grammatically capable were more willing to invest effort in challenging tasks and less likely to attribute difficulties to fixed ability constraints. These findings suggest that self-perceived grammatical competence functions as a motivational filter, influencing how learners interpret task demands and regulate their learning behaviour.

Conversely, learners who perceive their grammatical competence as limited may experience heightened anxiety, reduced confidence, and avoidance of complex grammatical forms. Horwitz's (2010) work on foreign language anxiety highlights how negative self-perceptions can undermine learners' willingness to participate and experiment with language. In grammar-focused contexts, such anxiety may lead learners to rely on surface-level strategies, memorisation, or test-taking shortcuts, rather than engaging deeply with grammatical concepts. These patterns underscore the importance of examining learners' perceptions alongside objective measures of competence.

In EFL contexts where grammar plays a central role in instruction and assessment, self-perceived grammatical competence becomes particularly salient. Research in Asian EFL settings has shown that learners' beliefs about grammar often reflect broader educational cultures that emphasise accuracy, error avoidance, and examination performance (Zhang, 2010; Pawlak, 2024). In such contexts, learners' perceptions may be shaped not only by their actual knowledge but also by repeated exposure to form-focused assessments and normative performance standards. Consequently, understanding how learners perceive their grammatical competence provides insight into the cognitive and affective dimensions of grammar learning that are not captured by test scores alone.

Within the Indonesian EFL context, studies have documented persistent challenges in learners' mastery of English grammar, particularly with syntactically complex structures and form-focused assessments (Marcellino, 2015; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). These challenges are often attributed to limited exposure to authentic language use, instructional constraints, and the dominance of exam-oriented learning. However, much of the existing research has focused on observable performance outcomes, such as error patterns or test scores, rather than learners' subjective perceptions of their grammatical competence. Given that self-perception plays a mediating role between instructional input and learning behaviour, this focus on performance alone offers an incomplete picture of grammar learning processes in Indonesian EFL settings.

METACOGNITIVE GRAMMAR LEARNING STRATEGIES

Metacognitive learning strategies constitute higher-order regulatory processes that enable learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Flavell, 1979; Rianto, 2022; Veenman et al., 2006; Zimmerman, 2002). Flavell (1979) originally conceptualised metacognition as encompassing both metacognitive knowledge—learners' awareness of their cognitive processes—and metacognitive regulation, which involves the active control of learning through strategic decision-making. In applied linguistics, metacognitive strategies are widely regarded as a cornerstone of effective and autonomous language learning.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (2017) identify metacognitive strategies as essential for managing complex language tasks, enabling learners to set goals, allocate resources, and evaluate progress. In

grammar learning, such strategies may include planning grammar revision schedules, monitoring accuracy during practice or test-taking, and evaluating the effectiveness of particular learning approaches. Through these processes, learners can move beyond reactive responses to errors and develop a more systematic and reflective approach to grammar learning.

Empirical research across language skills has consistently linked metacognitive strategy use to higher levels of proficiency and more efficient learning. Studies in reading and listening have shown that learners who actively monitor comprehension and evaluate strategies achieve better outcomes than those who rely solely on cognitive strategies (Zhang, 2010; Veenman et al., 2006). Although grammar learning has traditionally been associated with rule memorisation and practice, recent research suggests that metacognitive regulation also plays a crucial role in developing grammatical accuracy and flexibility (Pawlak, 2009, 2024).

Nevertheless, research focusing specifically on metacognitive grammar learning strategies remains comparatively limited. Pawlak (2009) argues that grammar learning strategies have often been overshadowed by research on vocabulary or skills-based strategies, resulting in an under-theorisation of how learners regulate grammatical learning. Moreover, the extent to which learners engage in metacognitive regulation appears to vary across educational and cultural contexts. In exam-oriented EFL environments, learners may prioritise practice frequency and immediate correction over reflective planning and post-task evaluation (Zhang, 2010; Zuhairi & Mistar, 2020).

Such tendencies are particularly relevant in contexts where grammar assessment is high-stakes and time-constrained. When learners focus primarily on achieving correct answers under pressure, metacognitive processes such as monitoring understanding or evaluating strategy effectiveness may be underutilised. This imbalance raises questions about how learners regulate grammar learning during test preparation and how such regulation relates to their perceptions of grammatical competence.

GRAMMAR ASSESSMENT AND TOEFL ITP

Grammar assessment in standardised proficiency tests typically requires learners to apply grammatical knowledge analytically rather than demonstrate communicative production. The TOEFL ITP Structure and Written Expression sections exemplify this assessment orientation by requiring test-takers to identify grammatical relationships, detect errors, and select appropriate forms within decontextualised sentences (Alderson et al., 1995; Phillips, 2001; ETS, 2022). These tasks place considerable cognitive demands on learners, as they must process linguistic input efficiently while managing time constraints and test anxiety.

Research on TOEFL-related grammar assessment has identified common areas of difficulty for EFL learners, including verb tense and aspect, modifiers, parallel constructions, and reduced clauses (Phillips, 2001). Success in these areas depends not only on declarative grammatical knowledge but also on learners' ability to monitor accuracy, make rapid decisions, and evaluate competing options. As Alderson, Clapham, and Wall (1995) note, effective test performance involves strategic competence alongside linguistic competence.

Despite the extensive use of the TOEFL ITP in EFL contexts, relatively little research has examined how learners perceive their grammatical competence in relation to specific test components. Most studies have focused on performance outcomes or preparation strategies, leaving learners' subjective experiences and self-evaluations underexplored (Dalimunte et al., 2023). Understanding learners' perceptions of their grammatical strengths and weaknesses in TOEFL ITP preparation is particularly important in contexts where test results carry academic or institutional consequences.

INTEGRATING SELF-PERCEIVED COMPETENCE AND METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Taken together, the literature on self-perceived grammatical competence, metacognitive learning strategies, and grammar assessment points to a complex interplay between learner beliefs, regulatory practices, and performance demands. Self-perceived competence influences learners' willingness to engage with grammatical challenges, while metacognitive strategies shape how learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. In assessment-driven contexts such as TOEFL ITP preparation, these factors may interact in ways that either support or hinder effective grammar learning.

Despite their theoretical compatibility, empirical studies integrating self-perceived grammatical competence and metacognitive grammar learning strategies remain scarce. Most existing research has examined these constructs separately, often focusing on general language learning rather than grammar-specific contexts. Moreover, studies that do address grammar learning frequently overlook the role of learners' perceptions, focusing instead on instructional effectiveness or test outcomes.

This gap is particularly evident in Southeast Asian EFL contexts, where grammar-focused assessment remains central to academic evaluation. Indonesian EFL learners operate within an educational environment characterised by limited exposure to English outside the classroom and strong emphasis on examination performance (Marcellino, 2015; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). Investigating how learners perceive their grammatical competence and regulate grammar learning strategies within this context can therefore contribute valuable insights to applied linguistics research on learner cognition and assessment.

In light of these considerations, the present study positions itself at the intersection of self-perceived grammatical competence, metacognitive grammar learning strategies, and standardised grammar assessment. By examining these constructs in relation to TOEFL ITP preparation among Indonesian EFL learners, the study seeks to address an underexplored area in applied linguistics and to advance understanding of grammar learning as a cognitively and strategically mediated process.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate Indonesian EFL learners' self-perceived grammatical competence and their use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies in the context of TOEFL ITP preparation. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate given the study's objective to identify overall patterns, tendencies, and distributions of learner perceptions and strategy use across a relatively large cohort (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By capturing data at a single point in time, the cross-sectional design allows for systematic examination of learners' perceived competence and metacognitive regulation as they relate to key grammatical domains assessed in the TOEFL ITP.

The focus on self-perceived competence and metacognitive strategies necessitates the use of self-report measures, which are widely employed in applied linguistics research to access learners' beliefs, awareness, and regulatory behaviours that are not directly observable (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). While such a design does not permit causal inference, it is well suited to describing learner profiles and identifying areas of perceived strength and difficulty, thereby providing an empirical basis for pedagogical and assessment-related insights. This methodological choice aligns with previous studies examining learner cognition and strategy use in EFL contexts (Mills et al., 2007; Pawlak, 2024).

PARTICIPANTS

The participants consisted of 210 undergraduate students enrolled in English-related programmes at a public university in Indonesia, including English education and English literature tracks. Within these programmes, English proficiency and standardised language assessment are integral to academic progression. All participants had either completed the TOEFL ITP or were actively preparing to take the test to fulfil institutional graduation or placement requirements. This inclusion criterion ensured that participants were familiar with the Structure and Written Expression sections of the TOEFL ITP, which constitute the grammatical focus of the present study.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants with direct and relevant experience of TOEFL ITP preparation. Such sampling is widely used in applied linguistics research when participant selection is guided by characteristics closely aligned with the research objectives (Dörnyei, 2007). The sample size exceeds commonly recommended thresholds for survey-based studies, allowing for reliable estimation of descriptive statistics and internal consistency measures (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Participation was voluntary, and ethical principles were upheld throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's aims and procedures, provided informed consent, and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality to encourage candid responses.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Data were collected using a self-report questionnaire consisting of three main sections. The first section elicited demographic information, including participants' academic programme and TOEFL ITP experience, to contextualise the findings. The second section measured learners' self-perceived grammatical competence, while the third section assessed their use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies during TOEFL ITP preparation.

The self-perceived grammatical competence section comprised items targeting grammatical structures commonly assessed in the TOEFL ITP Structure and Written Expression sections, such as verb forms, clause structures, modifiers, parallel constructions, and sentence-level agreement. These domains were selected based on test specifications and pedagogical descriptions of TOEFL grammar content (Alderson et al., 1995; Phillips, 2001; ETS, 2022). Items were phrased to capture learners' confidence in understanding and applying these structures, reflecting the conceptualisation of perceived competence as a belief-based construct rather than an objective performance measure (Bandura, 1997; Lockley, 2013).

The metacognitive grammar learning strategy section focused on three core dimensions of metacognitive regulation: planning, monitoring, and evaluation (Flavell, 1979; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Zimmerman, 2002). Items addressed learners' strategic behaviours before, during, and after grammar learning activities, such as setting learning goals, checking grammatical accuracy while practising, and reflecting on errors after completing exercises or tests. Responses in both sections were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, which is commonly used to measure perceptions and strategy frequency in language learning research (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

The questionnaire was developed based on established theoretical frameworks and previous empirical studies on self-efficacy and metacognitive strategy use in EFL learning (Mills et al., 2007; Pawlak, 2024). Content validity was established through expert review by two specialists in EFL instruction and language assessment, who evaluated the relevance, clarity, and representativeness of the items. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback to improve wording clarity and alignment with TOEFL ITP grammar constructs.

To assess internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each major section of the questionnaire. The results indicated satisfactory reliability, with alpha values exceeding .80 across all scales, which meets commonly accepted benchmarks for social science research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). These findings suggest that the instrument provides a reliable measure of learners' perceived grammatical competence and metacognitive grammar learning strategies.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data collection was conducted during scheduled class sessions to ensure a high response rate and standardised administration conditions. The questionnaire was administered in paper-based format and completed within approximately 20 minutes. To reduce response bias, participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that their responses would not affect their academic standing. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately after administration.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, consistent with the study's exploratory and profiling aims. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarise learners' self-perceived grammatical competence across grammatical domains and their reported use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies. This approach allows for identification of relative strengths and weaknesses in perceived competence, as well as dominant trends in planning, monitoring, and evaluation practices during TOEFL ITP preparation.

The alignment between data analysis and research objectives was maintained by focusing on descriptive patterns rather than inferential relationships. Such an analytic strategy is appropriate for studies aiming to provide a detailed overview of learner perceptions and strategies within a specific context, particularly when the goal is to inform pedagogy and future research directions rather than to test causal hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The results are thus interpreted as indicative of prevailing tendencies among the sampled population rather than as generalisable claims about all Indonesian EFL learners.

IV.   RESULTS

SELF-PERCEIVED GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE IN THE STRUCTURE SECTION

Learners' self-perceived grammatical competence in the Structure section of the TOEFL ITP varied across grammatical categories, indicating differentiated confidence levels depending on grammatical complexity and structural demands. Overall, higher levels of perceived competence were reported for grammatical items involving clause-level structures and verb-related forms, while lower levels were observed for items requiring more complex syntactic integration.

As presented in Table 1, the highest proportions of "Good," "Very Good," and "Excellent" responses were reported for verbs (Structure 9) and conjunctions (Structure 14). For verbs, more than 85% of respondents rated their understanding as good or above, with 23.3% reporting "Very Good" and 11.4% reporting "Excellent." A similarly high distribution was observed for conjunctions, where over 82% of learners reported positive confidence levels. These results indicate relatively strong perceived mastery of grammatical elements that are frequently encountered in instructional settings and assessed through rule-based recognition.

Moderately high confidence levels were also observed for independent clauses (Structure 1), adjective clauses (Structure 2), adverb clauses (Structure 5), and noun clauses (Structure 6). Across these categories, the majority of learners rated their understanding as "Good," with smaller but consistent proportions indicating "Very Good" or "Excellent" levels. The distribution of responses across these clause-related structures suggests a stable pattern of perceived competence in grammatical features involving clause identification and basic clause relationships.

In contrast, lower levels of self-perceived competence were evident for grammatical structures that require more complex syntactic processing. Participial phrases (Structure 3) and appositives (Structure 4) showed higher proportions of "Poor" and "Fair" responses compared to other categories. For participial phrases, over 40% of learners reported "Poor" or "Fair" understanding, while fewer than 11% rated their competence as "Very Good" or "Excellent." A similar distribution was observed for appositives, with nearly half of the respondents indicating lower confidence levels.

The lowest perceived competence was reported for parallel structure (Structure 11) and modifiers (Structure 12). In the case of parallel structure, more than 50% of learners rated their understanding as "Poor" or "Fair," and only a small proportion (8.6%) reported "Very Good" or "Excellent" competence. Modifiers

followed a comparable pattern, with nearly half of the respondents indicating lower confidence levels. These findings suggest that grammatical structures requiring structural symmetry, hierarchical relationships, or precise modification were perceived as more challenging than rule-governed or surface-level grammatical forms.

TABLE 1. Students' self-rated understanding level of the English Structure

Grammatical Item	Percent (n=210)					
	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Total Percent
Structure 1 (Independent Clauses)	2.4	19.5	57.6	13.8	6.7	100
Structure 2 (Adjective Clauses)	2.4	21.10	59.5	11.4	5.7	100
Structure 3 (Participial Phrases)	6.2	34.3	48.6	8.1	2.9	100
Structure 4 (Appositives)	8.1	39.5	41.0	8.1	3.3	100
Structure 5 (Adverb Clauses)	2.4	22.4	59.5	11.9	3.8	100
Structure 6 (Noun Clauses)	1.0	16.2	62.4	13.3	7.1	100
Structure 7 (Prepositional Phrases)	4.8	24.8	50.0	14.8	5.7	100
Structure 8 (Word Order)	3.8	33.8	45.2	11.4	5.7	100
Structure 9 (Verbs)	0.5	13.8	51.0	23.3	11.4	100
Structure 10 (Infinitive and Gerund)	7.1	28.6	47.1	11.0	6.2	100
Structure 11 (Parallel Structure)	10.0	41.0	40.5	5.7	2.9	100
Structure 12 (Modifiers)	7.1	39.0	42.9	6.7	4.3	100
Structure 13 (Comparative and Superlative)	6.7	37.1	43.3	8.1	4.8	100
Structure 14 (Conjunctions)	0.5	16.7	51.9	20.5	10.5	100
Structure 15 (Negative Words)	2.4	21.4	51.9	15.2	9.0	100

SELF-PERCEIVED GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE IN THE WRITTEN EXPRESSION SECTION

Learners' self-perceived competence in the Written Expression section exhibited patterns similar to those observed in the Structure section, though with generally lower confidence levels across several categories. This section focuses on learners' perceived ability to identify grammatical errors rather than to recognise correct forms.

As shown in Table 2, the highest confidence levels were reported for errors related to verbs (WE3), pronouns (WE5), and conjunctions (WE12). For WE3, over 60% of learners rated their ability as "Good" or higher, indicating relatively strong perceived competence in detecting verb-related errors. Similar trends were observed for pronouns and conjunctions, where the majority of respondents indicated moderate to high confidence levels.

TABLE 2. Students' self-rated understanding level of the English written Expression

	Percent (n=210)					
	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Total Percent
WE1 (Identifying Errors in Word Forms)	9.5	39.0	41.4	6.7	3.3	100
WE2 (Identifying Errors in Word Choice)	9.0	38.6	41.0	7.1	4.3	100
WE3 (Identifying Errors with Verbs)	6.7	32.9	47.1	7.6	5.7	100
WE4 (Identifying Errors with Parallel Structures)	14.8	42.4	32.4	7.1	3.3	100
WE5 (Identifying Errors with Pronouns)	6.7	27.6	51.0	10.5	4.3	100
WE6 (Identifying Errors with Singular and Plural Nouns)	8.1	31.4	43.3	12.4	4.8	100
WE7 (Identifying Errors with Verbals)	8.6	39.5	38.6	9.5	3.8	100
WE8 (Identifying Errors with Prepositions)	7.1	32.4	47.6	8.6	4.3	100
WE9 (Identifying Errors with Articles)	6.2	35.7	44.3	9.5	4.3	100
WE10 (Identifying Errors with Comparatives and Superlatives)	12.9	40.5	35.2	7.6	3.8	100
WE11 (Identifying Errors in Word Order)	11.0	35.7	41.4	8.6	3.3	100
WE12 (Identifying Errors with Conjunctions)	7.1	27.6	50.5	11.9	2.9	100

Moderate confidence levels were reported for errors involving prepositions (WE8), articles (WE9), and singular and plural nouns (WE6). In these categories, responses were more evenly distributed across "Fair" and "Good," with smaller proportions of "Very Good" and "Excellent" ratings. These distributions suggest a moderate degree of uncertainty when error identification requires attention to form–function relationships or subtle grammatical distinctions.

Lower perceived competence was particularly evident for grammatical categories involving structural comparison and symmetry. Parallel structures (WE4) and comparatives and superlatives (WE10) showed the highest proportions of "Poor" and "Fair" responses. For WE4, more than 57% of learners rated their ability as "Poor" or "Fair," while fewer than 11% reported high confidence. Similarly, WE10 displayed a concentration of responses in the lower confidence categories, indicating consistent difficulty in identifying errors that depend on relational and contrastive grammatical processing.

Additionally, verbals (WE7) and word order (WE11) were associated with lower perceived competence compared to more rule-based grammatical categories. These items require learners to evaluate multiple sentence elements simultaneously, and the distribution of responses reflects increased uncertainty in such contexts.

Taken together, the results in Table 2 indicate that learners perceived greater difficulty in error identification tasks that require integrative grammatical processing rather than isolated rule recognition. The overall pattern mirrors that of the Structure section, with lower perceived competence associated with syntactically complex or structurally interdependent grammatical features.

METACOGNITIVE GRAMMAR LEARNING STRATEGY USE

Learners' reported use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies during TOEFL ITP preparation is summarised in Table 3. The results indicate variation across different types of metacognitive regulation, with clear differences in the frequency of strategy use.

TABLE 3. Utilization of metacognitive strategies during TOEFL ITP preparation

Rank	Metacognitive strategies	Mean	SD	Usage level
1	Met 5: I try to find out ways how to become better learner of English grammar.	4.07	.993	High
2	Met 3: I try to notice my grammatical mistakes and try to look the difference with the correct version.	3.93	1.074	High
3	Met 1: I try to search for ways how to apply the rules that I know.	3.87	.937	High
4	Met 7: I look for people that I can talk to in English in order to improve my grammatical proficiency.	3.80	1.111	High
5	Met 2: I pay attention to the rules provided by the teacher or reference books.	3.71	1.088	High
6	Met 4: I have clear goals to improve my English grammar.	3.58	1.147	High
7	Met 6: I evaluate my progress in learning English grammar.	3.58	1.052	High
8	Met 8: I plan my schedule for grammar revision.	2.98	1.172	Moderate

Monitoring-related strategies were reported most frequently. The highest mean score was observed for Met 5 ("I try to find out ways how to become better learner of English grammar"), with a mean of 4.07, indicating a high level of engagement. Similarly, Met 3 ("I try to notice my grammatical mistakes and try to look the difference with the correct version") and Met 1 ("I try to search for ways how to apply the rules that I know") also recorded high mean values, suggesting frequent monitoring and self-checking behaviours during grammar learning.

Strategies related to attention and engagement with instructional input, such as Met 2 ("I pay attention to the rules provided by the teacher or reference books"), also showed relatively high mean scores. These findings suggest that learners commonly engage in strategies that support immediate awareness and regulation during grammar practice.

In contrast, planning-oriented strategies were used less consistently. Met 8 ("I plan my schedule for grammar revision") recorded the lowest mean score (2.98) and was categorised at a moderate usage level. This indicates that systematic advance planning for grammar learning was less frequently reported than monitoring and attention-based strategies.

Evaluation strategies, including Met 6 ("I evaluate my progress in learning English grammar"), were reported at a moderate-to-high level, with a mean score of 3.58. While learners did report some degree of reflective practice, the frequency of evaluation was lower than that of real-time monitoring strategies.

Overall, the distribution of mean scores in Table 3 shows that learners' metacognitive engagement during TOEFL ITP preparation was characterised by a stronger emphasis on monitoring and immediate regulation, with comparatively less frequent use of forward-planning strategies.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examined Indonesian EFL learners' self-perceived grammatical competence and their use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies in the context of TOEFL ITP preparation. Interpreted through the lenses of social cognitive theory and metacognitive models of language learning, the findings provide insight into how learners construe their grammatical ability and regulate grammar learning in a high-stakes assessment

environment. Rather than reiterating the results, this discussion explains the observed patterns by situating them within established theoretical frameworks and prior empirical research in applied linguistics.

SELF-PERCEIVED GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE AND THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE

A salient finding of the study is the systematic variation in learners' perceived grammatical competence across different grammatical categories. Learners reported higher confidence in grammatical features such as verb forms, conjunctions, and basic clause structures, while perceiving greater difficulty in structures involving syntactic embedding, modification, and parallelism. From a social cognitive perspective, this pattern can be understood in relation to mastery experiences, which Bandura (1997) identifies as the most influential source of self-efficacy beliefs. Grammatical features that are repeatedly practised and successfully handled are more likely to foster stable perceptions of competence.

This explanation aligns with previous research indicating that learners' confidence in language forms often mirrors instructional frequency and familiarity rather than structural simplicity alone (Mills et al., 2007; Hsieh & Kang, 2010). In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, verb forms and basic clause structures are introduced early and reinforced continuously across proficiency levels. As a result, learners accumulate repeated experiences of success with these forms, which strengthens perceived competence even when objective mastery may remain partial.

Conversely, the lower confidence reported for participial phrases, modifiers, and parallel structures reflects the limited and often fragmented exposure learners receive to these constructions. Such structures typically involve multiple grammatical constraints operating simultaneously, making them cognitively demanding and more prone to error. The perceived difficulty of these forms thus reflects not only their linguistic complexity but also learners' limited opportunities to consolidate successful experiences with them. This finding echoes research showing that learners' self-efficacy tends to decline as task demands require greater syntactic integration and attentional control (Pawlak, 2018; Azizmohammadi & Barjesteh, 2020).

Importantly, the findings underscore a central distinction in applied linguistics between grammatical competence as an objective linguistic construct and grammatical competence as a perceived capability. While the former can be assessed through performance measures, the latter shapes learners' engagement, persistence, and strategic behaviour. Learners who perceive themselves as weak in certain grammatical areas may approach related tasks with reduced confidence, which can affect how they allocate attention and effort during test preparation. This distinction reinforces the value of examining learner perceptions alongside observable performance.

GRAMMATICAL ERROR IDENTIFICATION AND COGNITIVE DEMANDS

Learners' self-perceived competence in the Written Expression section further illuminates how task demands shape grammatical confidence. Error identification tasks involving parallel structures, verbals, comparatives, and modifiers were associated with lower perceived competence than tasks targeting verb agreement or basic word choice. Unlike surface-level error detection, these tasks require learners to evaluate relationships among sentence elements and to maintain structural consistency across clauses or phrases.

From a cognitive perspective, such tasks impose a higher processing load because they require simultaneous attention to multiple grammatical constraints. Alderson, Clapham, and Wall (1995) note that grammar items in standardised tests often differ not only in linguistic content but also in the degree of cognitive integration they demand. The present findings suggest that learners are acutely aware of these demands and that their perceptions of difficulty reflect sensitivity to the underlying processing requirements of different item types.

This observation aligns with prior research indicating that learners tend to feel less confident when grammatical accuracy depends on relational rather than rule-based processing (Phillips, 2001; Graham, 2022). Identifying a faulty parallel structure, for example, requires learners to compare elements across a sentence and evaluate their syntactic symmetry, rather than simply applying a memorised rule. The lower perceived competence associated with such tasks suggests that learners may experience uncertainty not because they lack grammatical knowledge per se, but because they struggle to coordinate that knowledge under time constraints.

The findings thus contribute to applied linguistics research by highlighting how learners' grammatical confidence is shaped by the interaction between linguistic complexity and task format. In the context of TOEFL ITP preparation, grammatical competence is experienced not merely as knowledge of forms, but as the ability to deploy that knowledge efficiently in analytic, test-oriented tasks.

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGY USE: MONITORING VERSUS REGULATION

The analysis of metacognitive grammar learning strategies revealed a clear pattern: learners reported frequent use of monitoring strategies but less consistent engagement in planning and evaluation. Monitoring behaviours such as noticing errors and checking answers during practice were among the most frequently reported strategies, whereas advance planning and systematic review were reported at moderate levels.

This pattern is consistent with established models of metacognition, which distinguish between online regulatory processes and more global forms of strategic control (Flavell, 1979; Zimmerman, 2002). Monitoring occurs during task performance and allows learners to detect mismatches between expected and actual outcomes. Planning and evaluation, by contrast, require learners to adopt a broader temporal perspective and to regulate learning beyond the immediate task.

The predominance of monitoring strategies observed in this study aligns with findings from exam-oriented EFL contexts, where learners often prioritise immediate performance and error correction (Zhang, 2010; Mistar & Zuhairi, 2020). In such contexts, learners may develop strong habits of checking and correcting errors during practice, while engaging less frequently in strategic planning or post-task reflection. The present findings suggest that learners' metacognitive engagement is shaped by the demands and affordances of test preparation practices.

From a theoretical standpoint, this imbalance between monitoring and planning reflects a form of partial metacognitive development. Learners demonstrate awareness of their grammatical performance but may lack systematic approaches to regulating learning over time. This pattern has been documented in previous studies of grammar learning strategies, which show that learners often engage in reactive regulation without translating awareness into strategic adjustment (Pawlak, 2009; Oxford, 2017).

INTERPLAY BETWEEN PERCEIVED COMPETENCE AND STRATEGY USE

Taken together, the findings point to an interaction between learners' self-perceived grammatical competence and their metacognitive strategy use. Learners who perceive certain grammatical structures as difficult may rely heavily on monitoring strategies when encountering those structures, focusing on detecting and correcting errors as they arise. However, the limited use of planning and evaluation suggests that these perceptions do not consistently translate into proactive attempts to address perceived weaknesses.

This interaction can be interpreted through social cognitive theory, which posits that self-efficacy beliefs influence not only task engagement but also the selection and persistence of strategies (Bandura, 1997). When learners doubt their ability to master certain grammatical forms, they may focus on short-term coping strategies rather than long-term regulation. Monitoring allows learners to manage immediate performance demands without requiring sustained commitment to addressing underlying difficulties.

The findings thus support the view that perceived competence and metacognitive regulation are mutually reinforcing components of grammar learning. Learners' beliefs about their grammatical ability shape how they regulate learning, while their strategic practices, in turn, may reinforce or weaken those beliefs over time. This perspective aligns with research emphasising the dynamic relationship between learner cognition and strategy use in second language acquisition (Zimmerman, 2002; Pawlak, 2024).

CONTRIBUTION TO APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

This study contributes to applied linguistics research by integrating self-perceived grammatical competence and metacognitive grammar learning strategies within a specific assessment context. While previous studies have examined these constructs separately, empirical investigations that consider their interaction in TOEFL ITP preparation remain limited, particularly in Southeast Asian EFL settings.

The Indonesian context is especially relevant, as grammar-focused assessment continues to play a central role in academic evaluation. By examining learners' perceptions and strategies within this context, the study provides insight into how grammar learning is experienced under sustained assessment pressure. This contributes to a more contextualised understanding of grammar learning that goes beyond performance outcomes and considers learners' subjective engagement with grammatical demands

Furthermore, the findings align with broader research on grammar difficulty hierarchies and strategic regulation, reinforcing the generalisability of these patterns across EFL contexts while highlighting their manifestation in TOEFL-oriented preparation. The study thus extends existing knowledge by situating learner cognition within a high-stakes testing environment that remains underexplored in applied linguistics research.

INTERPRETIVE BOUNDARIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The interpretation of these findings is necessarily constrained by the use of self-report data. While learners' perceptions provide valuable insight into their experiences and regulatory practices, they do not constitute direct evidence of grammatical proficiency or strategy effectiveness. As previous research has noted, perceived competence may diverge from actual performance, particularly in test-oriented contexts (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Nevertheless, examining perceptions remains theoretically justified, as beliefs about competence play a central role in shaping learner behaviour. Future research may build on the present findings by integrating self-perceived competence measures with performance-based assessments and longitudinal designs. Such approaches would allow for a more comprehensive examination of how beliefs, strategies, and grammatical development interact over time.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined Indonesian EFL learners' self-perceived grammatical competence and their use of metacognitive grammar learning strategies in the context of TOEFL ITP preparation. By situating grammar learning within a high-stakes assessment environment, the study contributes to applied linguistics by conceptualising grammar not merely as a system of linguistic forms, but as a domain that is subjectively experienced, evaluated, and strategically regulated by learners.

The findings indicate that learners' perceptions of grammatical competence are unevenly distributed across grammatical categories. Perceived competence varies systematically according to grammatical complexity and task demands. Learners reported higher confidence in frequently encountered and structurally transparent forms, such as verb-related constructions and basic clause patterns, while expressing markedly lower confidence in integrative structures, including modifiers, participial phrases, and parallel constructions. This pattern highlights learner perception as an important mediating factor between grammatical knowledge and engagement with form-focused tasks, reinforcing the distinction between objective competence and perceived ability.

In parallel, the study revealed a differentiated profile of metacognitive grammar learning strategy use. Monitoring strategies, particularly those related to error detection and real-time checking, were reported most frequently during TOEFL ITP preparation. In contrast, planning and evaluative strategies were employed less consistently. This imbalance suggests that learners' metacognitive regulation is largely reactive, shaped by immediate performance pressures rather than long-term strategic control over grammar learning. When considered alongside learners' perceived grammatical weaknesses, these findings underscore the interdependence of beliefs and regulatory processes in grammar learning.

Theoretically, the results support social cognitive and metacognitive models of language learning, which emphasise reciprocal relationships among self-perception, strategy use, and task engagement. Grammar learning in high-stakes testing contexts thus emerges as both a cognitive and metacognitive challenge, strongly influenced by learners' beliefs about their linguistic capabilities.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on self-report data and a cross-sectional design. Future research may triangulate perceived competence with performance-based measures and adopt longitudinal approaches to capture changes over time. Within these constraints, the study offers an empirically grounded account of how EFL learners perceive and regulate grammar learning under assessment-driven conditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

[1]   Akmal, S., Rasyid, M. N. A., Masna, Y., & Soraya, C. N. (2020). EFL learners' difficulties in the structure and written expression section of TOEFL test in an Indonesian university. Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities, 7(2), 156-180. https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v7i2.6472

[2]   Alderson, J. C., Clapham, C., & Wall, D. (1995). *Language test construction and evaluation*. Cambridge University Press.

[3]   Azizmohammadi, F., & Barjesteh, H. (2020). On the relationship between EFL learners' grammar learning strategy use and their grammar performance: Learners' gender focus. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 11 (4), 583–592. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1104.08

[4]   Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman.

[5]   Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

[6]   Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.

[7]   Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

[8]   Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. Routledge.

[9]   Dörnyei, Z., & Taguchi, T. (2010). *Questionnaires in second language research*. Routledge.

[10]   Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 83–107.

[11]   Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

[12]   ETS. (2022). *TOEFL ITP assessment series: Test and score data summary*. Educational Testing Service.

[13]   Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive–developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist, 34*(10), 906–911. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.906

[14]   Graham, S. (2022). Self-efficacy and language learning – what it is and what it isn't. *The Language Learning Journal*, *50*(2), 186–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2022.2045679

[15]   Horwitz, E. K. (2010). Foreign and second language anxiety. *Language Teaching*, 43(2), 154–167. https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480999036X

[16]   Hsieh, P. P.-H., & Kang, H.-S. (2010). Attribution and self-efficacy and their interrelationship in the Korean EFL context. *Language Learning, 60*(3), 606–627. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00570.x

[17]   Lockley, T. (2013). Exploring self-perceived communication competence in foreign language learning. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 3(2), 187–212.

[18]   Marcellino, M. (2015). English language teaching in Indonesia: a continuous challenge in education and cultural diversity. *TEFLIN Journal*, *19*(1), 57–69. https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v19i1/57-69.

[19]   Mills, N., Pajares, F., & Herron, C. (2007). Self-efficacy of college intermediate French students: Relation to achievement and motivation. *Language Learning, 57*(3), 417–442. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2007.00421.x

[20]   Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill. https://doi.org/10.1177/014662169501900308

[21]   O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.

[22]   Oxford, R. L. (2017). *Teaching and researching language learning strategies: Self-regulation in context* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

[23]   Pawlak, M. (2009). Grammar Learning Strategies and Language Attainment: Seeking a Relationship . *Research in Language*, *7*, 43–60. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10015-009-0004-7.

[24]   Pawlak, M. (2024). Grammar Learning Strategies: Towards a Pedagogical Intervention. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, 39(0), 174–191. https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2024.39.12

[25]   Phillips, D. (2001). *Longman complete course for the TOEFL test*. Longman.

[26]   Rianto, A. (2022). Assessing Metacognitive Online Reading Strategy Usage among EFL Teachers in Indonesia. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 28(3), 168-180. http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2022-2803-11

[27]   Schmitt, N. (2007). *An introduction to applied linguistics* (2nd ed.). Hodder Education.

[28]   Sukyadi, D., & Mardiani, R. (2011). The washback effect of the English national examination. *K@ta*, 13(1), 109–111.

[29]   Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2019). *Using multivariate statistics* (7th ed.). Pearson.

[30]   Tılfarlıoğlu, F. Y & Cinkara, E. (2009). Self- efficacy in EFL: differences among proficiency groups and relationship with success. *Novitas-ROYAL*, 3(2), 129-142.

[31]   Ur, P. (2012). *A course in English language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

[32]   Veenman, M.V.J., Van Hout-Wolters, B.H.A.M. & Afflerbach, P. (2006). Metacognition and learning: conceptual and methodological considerations. *Metacognition Learning* **1**, 3–14. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11409-006-6893-0.

[33]   Zhang, L. J. (2010). A dynamic metacognitive systems account of EFL reading strategies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 44(2), 320–353. https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2010.223352

[34]   Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview. *Theory Into Practice*, *41*(2), 64–70. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2

[35]   Zuhairi, A & Mistar, J. (2023). Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Vocabulary Mastery by Indonesian EFL Learners. *World Journal of English Language*, 13(8), 453–461. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n8p453