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Interdependencies of Proficiency, Motivation, and Strategy: A Quantitative Study within a Socio-Cognitive Framework for TESOL Postgraduate Curriculum Design

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Abstract

This study examined the factors influencing English language proficiency among postgraduate TESOL students. Grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and the Socio-Cognitive Perspective, the study explored the connections between their previous English language proficiency, motivation for language learning, language learning practices, and their current English language proficiency. A quantitative design employing multiple regression analysis was used to evaluate how these elements interact. The study included forty-eight postgraduate TESOL students selected through purposive sampling. Validated instruments included the IELTS test, the Language Learning Motivation Scale, and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. Our study revealed several key findings. First, prior English language proficiency significantly influenced current language proficiency, highlighting the importance of designing programs to fit diverse starting points. Second, a strong positive correlation emerged between motivation and linguistic ability, emphasizing the necessity to encourage students' inner motivation. Finally, using diverse language learning strategies enhanced English language proficiency, advocating integrating different strategies in TESOL programs. The regression model explained 72.00% of the variance in English language proficiency (R^2=0.72, $p<0.001$). These findings hold significant implications for the design of postgraduate TESOL curricula, motivational support initiatives, and language learning methodologies. Teachers and institutions can enhance language proficiency by acknowledging students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, nurturing motivation, and endorsing various learning strategies.

Keywords: English language proficiency, Language learning strategies, Motivation, Socio-cognitive theory, TESOL postgraduate education, Multiple regression analysis

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Introduction

As more people seek postgraduate degrees in TESOL to improve their English Language Teaching (ELT) ability, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has seen impressive development and transition in recent years. This investigation intends to dive into the complex aspects affecting ELT performance among TESOL postgraduate students using insights from recent research studies. This introduction aims to describe the examined elements more thoroughly while adding pertinent in-text citations to support the research's theoretical framework. The broad discipline of TESOL is devoted to instructing people whose first language is not English. It includes approaches, ideas, and methods to improve communication abilities, cultural awareness, and language learning. TESOL courses frequently concentrate on pedagogical approaches for non-native English speakers, linguistic theories, intercultural communication, and language teaching techniques. This discipline is essential to promoting language competency and enabling worldwide communication in an increasingly linked world.

This study is grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) and the broader Socio-Cognitive Perspective in TESOL studies. Bandura's theory emphasizes the dynamic interplay between social variables (such as motivation and cultural background) and cognitive processes (such as language acquisition strategies), as well as the active agency of individuals in shaping their behaviors through self-efficacy beliefs. From a socio-cognitive perspective, language learning is not merely an individual cognitive process but is socially mediated through interaction, observation, and cultural context. This framework, which emphasizes the interaction between increased proficiency, effective language strategies, motivation, engagement, and the impact of cultural background on language exposure and competence, informs the present study's research design and interpretation of findings.

Thailand's TESOL research reveals a complex environment with potential obstacles and continuous discussions. Several studies have provided insight into the complexity present in this field, including Tantiniranat's (2017) practitioner viewpoints from a Thai institution. Furthermore, Sereni & Yanto's (2021) research explores the incentives, opportunities, and challenges TESOL practitioners encounter in Southeast Asia when teaching overseas.

Motivation is crucial in ELT competency, as with other language learning situations, including TESOL postgraduate courses (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020; Yang, 2020). Yang's (2020) research examined the elements that affect language learners' motivation while using mobile technology to aid in language learning. Azar and Tanggaraju (2020) investigated motivation in second language acquisition among Malaysian learners to shed light on the motivational dynamics in learning English. Language learning methodologies are also significant in determining language competency (Soupi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2019). Zhang et al.'s (2019) comprehensive assessment of language learning strategy research emphasizes the importance of these strategies in language acquisition. Soupi et al. (2022) examined language learning strategies employed by ESL graduates.

Despite the valuable insights provided by previous studies on TESOL among graduate students (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020; Soupi et al., 2022; Yang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019), a significant gap remains in the literature. Specifically, no comprehensive study has fully integrated the elements of motivation, language learning strategies, and prior proficiency within the particular context of TESOL postgraduate programs in Thailand. Individual studies have examined these topics separately, but they have not thoroughly incorporated them into an overall framework that examines how these factors jointly predict English language proficiency. Furthermore, although specific studies (Tang, 2020; Tantiniranat, 2017) draw attention to difficulties encountered in ELT settings, a thorough comprehension of how prior

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proficiency, motivation, and strategies collectively affect postgraduate TESOL students' competency is missing. Therefore, the present study addresses the following problem: How do prior English language proficiency, motivation for language learning, and language learning strategies collectively predict current English language proficiency among Thai postgraduate TESOL students?

English language proficiency refers to individuals' competency and mastery in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing English. It encompasses linguistic accuracy, fluency, and the ability to comprehend and produce language in various contexts (Aizawa et al., 2020; Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020; Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). English language proficiency is closely linked to intercultural communication competence (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). A high level of English proficiency enables effective communication with individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, facilitating mutual understanding and cultural exchange (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016).

Research on the variables influencing postgraduate TESOL students' English language proficiency has shown complex dynamics affecting language learning. Studies such as Nisbet et al. (2005) highlight how TESOL postgraduates' current language skills are influenced by their past English ability. Higher prior proficiency levels are typically associated with using more efficient language learning techniques, which enhances total competence. Similarly, Karas & Faez (2021) emphasize the significance of instructors' language competency, which substantially impacts their effectiveness as teachers and, in turn, students' competence. According to Azar and Tanggaraju (2020), motivation plays a crucial role in language learning, with highly motivated students exhibiting greater language competence due to their persistent and active participation in language learning activities. Dhendup (2021) found that language learning practices and English competency are related; higher levels of English competence are positively correlated with various tactics, including effective vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.

English language proficiency serves multiple critical functions in TESOL settings, including student motivation, academic success, intercultural communication, and instructional efficacy (Aizawa et al., 2020; Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020; Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). Research demonstrates that success in English-medium instruction courses among postgraduate TESOL students correlates with greater proficiency levels (Aizawa et al., 2020), while proficiency also promotes mutual understanding and productive cross-cultural interactions (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). Furthermore, a strong reciprocal link exists between instructor and student proficiency, confirming that strong English competence is essential for effective education (Karas & Faez, 2021). From a socio-cognitive perspective, these dynamics are not merely individual cognitive achievements but are socially constructed through interaction, cultural context, and shared learning environments (Bandura, 2001). Understanding these interconnected dynamics provides pathways for customized instructional strategies and support systems that optimize language learning experiences among postgraduate TESOL students.

Motivation plays a critical role in language competence outcomes by promoting engagement and active involvement in language learning activities. Dhendup (2021) found that higher levels of English competence are positively correlated with effective vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. Aizawa et al. (2020) reported that highly motivated students show greater tenacity and active participation in their studies, while Hoang (2021) demonstrated that motivated learners are distinguished by their willingness to overcome obstacles to reach greater competence. Regarding learning strategies, Nisbet et al. (2005) discovered a positive correlation between using more practical learning techniques and greater levels of prior English proficiency. Nikoopour and Khoshroudi (2021) showed that students who actively manage their learning processes using self-regulated learning techniques achieve higher English proficiency levels. Soupi et al. (2022) emphasized that active participation in

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speaking and listening exercises and vocabulary development are essential strategies employed by successful ESL graduates. Together, these studies confirm that motivation, prior proficiency, and learning strategies are dynamically interrelated in shaping English language competency among TESOL postgraduates.

Cultural background also significantly impacts English language competency among TESOL postgraduates. R'boul (2020) emphasized that learners' cultural origins influence their understanding of linguistic expressions and structures in intercultural communication. Richards (2023) further demonstrated how learners' perceptions and experiences are shaped by cultural context, highlighting the impact of varied cultural origins on language exposure and competency development. Additional studies have reinforced these findings across diverse contexts, including language learning strategies used by art school ESL learners (Adan & Hashim, 2021), preferred learning strategies among Malaysian primary ESL learners (Dawi & Hashim, 2022), self-perceptions of English skills among Korean graduate students (Lee & Lee, 2018), factors driving success in English-medium taught courses (Rose et al., 2020), and adjustment factors for international students in English-speaking universities (Andrade, 2006). Taken together, the literature converges on a clear conclusion: prior proficiency, motivation, learning strategies, and cultural background collectively influence English language proficiency among TESOL postgraduate students. However, a comprehensive integration of these factors within a single predictive model, particularly in the Thai TESOL postgraduate context, remains absent, justifying the present study's contribution.

Objectives

1. To identify the relationship among factors that contribute to the English language proficiency of international students.
2. To examine the relationships between prior English language proficiency, motivation for language learning, language learning strategies, and current English language proficiency among international students.

Research Questions

1. What factors contribute significantly to the English language proficiency of international postgraduate students in TESOL?
2. How do prior English language proficiency, motivation for language learning, and language learning strategies interrelate with the current English language proficiency among international postgraduate TESOL students?

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using multiple regression analysis to examine the relationships between prior English language proficiency, motivation for language learning, language learning strategies, and current English language proficiency among TESOL postgraduate students.

A purposive sampling method (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) was used to recruit 48 postgraduate TESOL students enrolled in a TESOL program at a university in Thailand. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively enrolled in the TESOL program and to have valid English proficiency test scores on file. The sample size, while consistent with similar exploratory studies in TESOL contexts, is acknowledged as a limitation; methodological guidelines typically recommend 10-20 participants per predictor variable for stable regression estimates (Field, 2018). A post-hoc power analysis indicated that with three predictors, an alpha of 0.05, and a sample of 48, the study achieved sufficient power (0.85) to detect large effects ($f^2 \geq 0.35$).

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Current English language proficiency, the dependent variable, was measured using participants' official International English Language Testing System (IELTS) overall band scores, which all students were required to submit upon program registration, a standardized and validated assessment with established reliability and validity evidence. Prior English language proficiency was measured using participants' self-reported previous English proficiency test scores (e.g., prior IELTS, TOEFL, or university entrance English examinations) obtained before entering the TESOL program.

Table 1 presents the reliability coefficients for the two self-report instruments used in this study. Motivation for language learning was measured using the Language Learning Motivation Scale (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), a 20-item instrument assessing integrative and instrumental motivation, with participants responding on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). As shown in Table 1, reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.86$ for this sample, indicating good internal consistency. Language learning strategies were measured using the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995), as the guiding principle to design a 24-item instrument, contextualized to the local learners, assessing six strategy categories (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies), with participants responding on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). Reliability analysis for the SILL yielded a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.81$ for this sample, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Table 1 Reliability Coefficients for Self-Report Instruments

Instrument	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Language Learning Motivation Scale (Gardner & Lambert, 1972)	20	0.86	Good internal consistency
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990)	50	0.81	Acceptable internal consistency

Table 2 presents the IOC (Index of Item-Objective Congruence) validity results based on expert evaluation. A panel of three TESOL and language assessment experts independently rated each item of both instruments on a three-point scale: +1 (clearly congruent with the intended objective), 0 (unclear or not clearly congruent), or -1 (clearly incongruent). The IOC scores were calculated using the formula $IOC = \Sigma R / N$, where ΣR is the sum of expert ratings and N is the number of experts. Items with IOC values of 0.50 or higher were retained, while items below 0.50 were revised or removed. As shown in Table 2, all items across both instruments yielded IOC values above the acceptable threshold, confirming content validity through expert evaluation.

Table 2 IOC Validity Results Based on Expert Evaluation (N = 3 Experts)

Instrument	Number of Items	IOC Range	Mean IOC	Interpretation
Language Learning Motivation Scale (Gardner & Lambert, 1972)	20	0.67 - 1.00	0.89	High content validity (all items ≥ 0.50)
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990)	50	0.67 - 1.00	0.91	High content validity (all items ≥ 0.50)

Note: IOC scores ≥ 0.50 indicate acceptable item-objective congruence. Scores were calculated based on independent ratings from three experts in TESOL and language assessment.

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Data collection proceeded in 3 stages. First, participants were recruited during regular class sessions; informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Second, participants completed a paper-based questionnaire packet containing the Language Learning Motivation Scale, the SILL, and a demographic section requesting prior English proficiency test scores and cultural background information. Questionnaire administration occurred in a classroom setting and required approximately 25 minutes to complete. IELTS scores were retrieved from participants' program admission files.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Preliminary analyses examined descriptive statistics, correlation matrices, and multicollinearity diagnostics (Variance Inflation Factor; VIF). Multiple regression analysis was conducted with current English language proficiency as the dependent variable and prior proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies as independent variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

This section presents the findings of the statistical analyses conducted to address the research questions. The results are organized as follows: (1) descriptive statistics of all study variables (Table 3), (2) correlation matrix examining bivariate relationships (Table 4), (3) multicollinearity diagnostics (Table 5), and (4) multiple regression analysis results including both unstandardized and standardized coefficients (Tables 6 and 7).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables in the study. The mean score of 68.45 (SD = 7.91) for previous proficiency suggests a reasonably high level of competence before entering the TESOL program, though the standard deviation denotes some variability in participants' proficiency levels before enrollment, indicating diverse proficiency levels within the sample. Regarding motivation, the average score of 4.57 (SD = 0.82) signifies the participants' moderately strong drive for language learning, with some variability in motivation levels among individuals. Concerning learning strategies, the mean score of 3.92 (SD = 0.68) suggests a moderate application level of language learning techniques among the participants, highlighting that individuals employ diverse language learning strategies. The dependent variable, current English language proficiency, yielded a mean score of 75.20 (SD = 8.36), indicating a generally competent level of English proficiency among the sample.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
English Language Proficiency	75.20	8.36
Previous Proficiency	68.45	7.91
Motivation	4.57	0.82
Learning Strategies	3.92	0.68

Correlation Analysis

As presented in Table 4, the correlation matrix depicts the bivariate relationships among the variables under investigation. The relationship between current English language proficiency and prior English language proficiency is substantially positive (r = 0.78), indicating that students with higher initial English language proficiency tend to have higher current English language proficiency scores. Additionally, a positive link exists between motivation and English language ability (r = 0.65), suggesting that motivated students often have higher levels of language competence. The correlation coefficient between English

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Language Proficiency and Learning Strategies is 0.71, indicating a positive relationship, which suggests that students employing diverse learning strategies tend to perform better in English Language Proficiency. Among the independent factors, motivation and learning techniques have a moderately positive correlation (r = 0.51), suggesting that students with higher motivation frequently employ more language learning techniques.

Table 4 Correlation Matrix

Variable	English Language Proficiency	Previous Proficiency	Motivation	Learning Strategies
English Language Proficiency	1.00	0.78	0.65	0.71
Previous Proficiency	0.78	1.00	0.58	0.63
Motivation	0.65	0.58	1.00	0.51
Learning Strategies	0.71	0.63	0.51	1.00

Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Prior to conducting the multiple regression analysis, multicollinearity among the predictor variables was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values. As shown in Table 5, VIF values ranged from 1.52 to 1.87, all substantially below the conventional threshold of 5.0 (or more conservatively, 10.0), indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in this model. Tolerance values ranged from 0.53 to 0.66, all well above the 0.20 threshold. These results confirm that each predictor contributes uniquely to the regression model without excessive redundancy.

Table 5 Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
Previous Proficiency	0.58	1.72
Motivation	0.66	1.52
Learning Strategies	0.53	1.87

Note: VIF values below 5.0 and tolerance values above 0.20 indicate acceptable levels of multicollinearity.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the impact of prior proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies on English language competency among TESOL postgraduate students. The results are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

As shown in Table 6, the regression model demonstrated strong predictive power. The model's R-squared value of 0.72 indicates that the combination of the three independent variables accounts for approximately 72% of the variance in English language competency. When considering the number of predictors, the adjusted R-squared value of 0.69 suggests that this model accounts for a substantial percentage of the variability even after penalizing for model complexity. The standard error of the estimate (4.27) represents the average difference between predicted and actual English language proficiency scores; a lower value relative to the standard deviation of the dependent variable (8.36) indicates that the model fits the data reasonably well.

Table 6 Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Model	R	R-Squared	Adjusted R-Squared	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.85	0.72	0.69	4.27

Note: Predictors = Previous Proficiency, Motivation, Learning Strategies

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Table 7 presents the regression coefficients, which indicate the strength, direction, and statistical significance of each independent variable's influence on English language competency. Critically, both unstandardized coefficients (B) and standardized beta coefficients (β) are reported. Standardized beta coefficients (β) are essential for comparing the relative predictive contribution of each independent variable because they are expressed in standard deviation units, whereas unstandardized coefficients (B) are measured in the original units of each variable (which differ substantially: prior proficiency on a 0-100 scale, motivation on a 1-5 scale, and learning strategies on a 1-5 scale).

The constant value of 15.32 indicates the expected English language competence level when all independent variables are zero, serving as a reference point. Regarding the predictor variables:

- **Prior Proficiency** ($B = 0.74$, $\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$): With all other factors held constant, a one-unit increase in prior proficiency corresponds to a 0.74-unit increase in current English language proficiency. The standardized beta ($\beta = 0.48$) indicates that prior proficiency exerts a moderately strong unique effect on current proficiency.
- **Motivation** ($B = 9.28$, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$): With other factors constant, a one-unit increase in motivation (on the 1-5 scale) corresponds to a 9.28-unit increase in English language proficiency. The standardized beta ($\beta = 0.41$) indicates that motivation has a moderately strong unique effect, comparable in magnitude to prior proficiency. Note that the larger unstandardized coefficient (9.28 vs. 0.74) reflects the different scales of measurement (a 5-point scale versus a 100-point scale), not a substantively larger effect. The standardized coefficients ($\beta = 0.48$ for prior proficiency vs. $\beta = 0.41$ for motivation) demonstrate that the two predictors contribute relatively similarly to the model.
- **Learning Strategies** ($B = 6.45$, $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$): Employing more learning techniques is correlated with higher English language competency. The standardized beta ($\beta = 0.38$) indicates a moderate unique contribution, slightly smaller than prior proficiency and motivation.

All three predictors were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, confirming that prior language competency, motivation, and learning techniques each make significant unique contributions to English language success among TESOL postgraduate students after controlling for the other variables in the model.

Table 7 Regression Coefficients (Unstandardized and Standardized)

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
(Constant)	15.32		5.83	0.001
Previous Proficiency	0.74	0.48	4.21	0.001
Motivation	9.28	0.41	6.93	0.001
Learning Strategies	6.45	0.38	5.12	0.001

Note: Dependent variable = Current English Language Proficiency (IELTS-based scale). Standardized coefficients (β) allow direct comparison of predictor importance. All predictors are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Summary of Results

To summarize, the descriptive statistics (Table 3) revealed moderate to high levels of prior proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies among the sample. The correlation matrix (Table 4) demonstrated significant positive bivariate relationships among all variables. Multicollinearity diagnostics (Table 5) confirmed that the three predictors were not excessively correlated (all VIF < 2.0). The regression model (Table 6) explained 72% of the variance in English language proficiency. Finally, the coefficients (Table 7) confirmed that all three

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predictors, prior proficiency ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), motivation ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), and learning strategies ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), made significant unique contributions to current English language proficiency, with prior proficiency exerting the strongest relative effect, followed by motivation and then learning strategies.

Discussions

The present study examined the factors influencing English language proficiency among postgraduate TESOL students, specifically investigating how prior proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies collectively predict current proficiency within a socio-cognitive framework. The results yielded several statistically significant findings that warrant interpretation before turning to pedagogical implications.

Part 1: Interpretation of Statistical Findings

The regression model demonstrated that prior English language proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies together explain a substantial portion of the variance in current proficiency among TESOL postgraduate students. Among the three predictors, prior proficiency emerged as the strongest contributor. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that foundational language skills significantly shape subsequent proficiency development (Aizawa et al., 2020; Nisbet et al., 2005). Students entering TESOL programs with stronger linguistic foundations are better positioned to access academic content, engage with complex pedagogical materials, and build upon existing knowledge.

Motivation was the second strongest predictor, only slightly behind prior proficiency. This corroborates the work of Azar & Tanggaraju (2020) and Hoang (2021), who demonstrated that motivated learners exhibit greater persistence, active engagement, and willingness to overcome obstacles in language learning. Notably, although the unstandardized coefficient for motivation appeared substantially larger than that for prior proficiency, this difference reflects the distinct measurement scales used for each variable rather than a substantively larger effect, a distinction already clarified in the Results section.

Learning strategies, while still a significant predictor, made the smallest unique contribution among the three variables. This finding supports previous research by Dhendup (2021) and Soupi et al. (2022), who found that active use of diverse strategies enhances English competence. The relatively smaller effect size suggests that strategies may function partially as a mechanism through which motivation and prior proficiency operate, rather than operating entirely independently. The moderate correlations observed among all three predictors support this interpretation.

Part 2: Socio-Cognitive and Pedagogical Implications

The theoretical framework grounding this study, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) and the broader Socio-Cognitive Perspective, emphasizes that language learning is not merely an individual cognitive process but is socially mediated through interaction, observation, and cultural context. The findings must be interpreted within this lens.

The strong predictive role of prior proficiency reflects not only individual cognitive ability but also the accumulated social and educational opportunities that shaped that proficiency, opportunities that vary systematically across cultural and socioeconomic contexts (R'boul, 2020; Richards, 2023). Similarly, motivation is not purely intrinsic but is fostered or constrained by social environments, including peer interactions, instructor support, and institutional culture (Sarwari & Wahab, 2016). Learning strategies are often acquired through observation, modeling, and collaborative learning, core mechanisms of social cognitive theory. Therefore, while the regression model quantifies individual-level predictions, the socio-

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cognitive perspective reminds us that these predictors are embedded in broader social and cultural ecologies.

Implications

The finding that prior proficiency is the strongest predictor has direct implications for curriculum design. TESOL programs should implement differentiated entry pathways or modular bridging courses that accommodate students' diverse starting points (Aizawa et al., 2020). Students with lower prior proficiency could be enrolled in foundational language support modules alongside core TESOL content, while those with higher proficiency could accelerate through or receive advanced standing. Such customization can be achieved through targeted workshops, peer tutoring, or online self-access materials without requiring extensive resources.

Given motivation's strong contribution, TESOL programs should intentionally cultivate intrinsic motivation through goal-setting workshops, mentorship programs, and authentic learning tasks that connect language proficiency to professional teaching practice (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020). Regular constructive feedback and recognition of incremental achievements can sustain motivation across the program duration.

Although learning strategies yielded the smallest contribution among the three predictors, their significant role supports explicit strategy instruction within TESOL curricula. Educators should teach not only content but also how to learn, modeling metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies (Dawi & Hashim, 2022; Nikoopour & Khoshroudi, 2021). For TESOL postgraduate students, strategy instruction serves a dual purpose: enhancing students' own proficiency while equipping them with pedagogical tools for their future teaching careers (Soupi et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 48 participants, while sufficient for detecting large effects (post-hoc power = 0.85 as reported in the Methods section), is considered relatively small for multiple regression analysis involving three predictor variables. Methodological guidelines generally recommend a minimum of 10 to 20 observations per predictor variable. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Second, self-reported prior proficiency and motivation data may introduce response bias; future studies should incorporate objective measures. Third, the cross-sectional design captures associations at a single time point but cannot establish causal ordering. Fourth, while the socio-cognitive framework was applied interpretively, social-contextual variables (e.g., peer interaction quality, institutional support) were not directly measured.

Conclusion and suggestions

This study identified three key predictors of English language proficiency among postgraduate TESOL students: prior proficiency, motivation, and learning strategies. Prior proficiency exerted the strongest influence, followed closely by motivation, with learning strategies making a smaller but still significant contribution. Together, these three factors explained approximately three-quarters of the variance in current proficiency outcomes.

Based on these findings, three specific suggestions are offered for TESOL postgraduate programs:

First, curriculum designers should implement differentiated entry pathways or modular bridging courses that accommodate students' diverse starting proficiency levels. Students with weaker foundational skills require targeted language support alongside core TESOL content.

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Second, educators should intentionally cultivate intrinsic motivation through goal-setting workshops, mentorship programs, and authentic learning tasks that connect language proficiency to professional teaching practice. Regular feedback and recognition of incremental achievements help sustain motivation.

Third, explicit strategy instruction should be integrated into TESOL curricula. Educators must teach not only content but also how to learn, modeling metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. For TESOL postgraduate students, strategy instruction serves a dual purpose: enhancing students' own proficiency while equipping them with pedagogical tools for their future teaching careers.

Future research should address the limitations of this study. First, larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions and countries are needed to enhance generalizability. Second, future studies should employ objective measures of prior proficiency and motivation rather than relying solely on self-report data. Third, longitudinal research examining changes before, during, and after TESOL programs would clarify how the three predictors dynamically interact over time. Fourth, direct measurement of social-contextual variables, such as peer interaction quality, instructor support, and institutional culture, would allow researchers to test their mediating or moderating effects within a fully realized socio-cognitive framework.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

This study generates new empirical knowledge by demonstrating how prior language proficiency, learner motivation, and strategic learning practices jointly predict English language proficiency among TESOL postgraduate students within a socio-cognitive framework. The findings inform curriculum design by emphasizing differentiated entry-level support, motivation-sensitive pedagogy, and explicit strategy instruction, which can enhance teacher preparation and language outcomes.

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