# The Relationship Between Cognitive Processes and Language Production in Foreign Language Learners

**Sofiyani Nasution[1], Huda Hizkia Ahmad[2], Nadila Tanjung[3], Yani Lubis[4]**
[1234]Universiversitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
*Penulis Korespondensi: yanilubis@uinsu.ac.id

**Abstract**. : This study explores the relationship between cognitive processes and language production among foreign language learners by analyzing the roles of working memory, attentional control, and self-monitoring in shaping spoken and written performance. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, task-based classroom observations, and analysis of learners' written outputs. The findings indicate that cognitive mechanisms significantly influence the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of learners' language production. Learners with stronger working memory capacity demonstrated better ability to integrate information, construct coherent sentences, and maintain linguistic accuracy, while those with limited memory resources tended to rely on simplification strategies and reduced syntactic complexity. Attentional control was found to be crucial in managing competing linguistic demands, especially during spontaneous speech. Additionally, self-monitoring contributed to improved error correction and refinement of ideas, particularly in writing tasks, where learners have more time for cognitive planning compared to spoken communication. Differences between oral and written performance further highlight how task modality interacts with cognitive load. Overall, the study emphasizes that cognitive functioning plays a pivotal role in determining learners' language output, and suggests that instructional practices aimed at strengthening cognitive skills may enhance communicative competence in foreign language learning contexts.

**Keywords:** cognitive processes, working memory, attentional control, language production, foreign language learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding how foreign language learners produce language requires an in-depth examination of the cognitive processes that operate beneath the surface of speaking and writing (Halim et al., 2023). Language production is not a simple act of retrieving words and arranging them into sentences; rather, it is a complex cognitive undertaking that involves attention, working memory, long-term memory, information processing, and executive control (Shahid et al., 2022). These cognitive components work simultaneously to help learners plan, organize, and articulate their intended messages. For many learners of a foreign language (FL), the cognitive demands of producing accurate and meaningful utterances are even greater because they must navigate between their first language (L1) and the target language (L2), manage limited linguistic resources, and compensate for gaps in vocabulary, grammar, and fluency (Lima, 2023). Therefore, exploring the relationship between cognitive processes and language production in FL learners is essential for understanding why some learners can express themselves effectively while others struggle, despite similar instructional backgrounds.

Language production is typically understood as occurring in several stages, including conceptualization, formulation, and articulation (Guhe, 2020). During the conceptualization stage, learners generate ideas based on communicative intentions. This step is highly dependent

on cognitive processes such as attention and memory, as learners need to focus on relevant concepts and retrieve background knowledge. For FL learners, conceptualization is often influenced by the presence of the L1, meaning that learners may conceptualize ideas using structures or patterns familiar in their native language before attempting to express them in the L2. If the cognitive processes involved in conceptualization are overloaded or inefficient, learners may experience difficulty in generating coherent or context ually appropriate ideas.

The formulation stage, where ideas are transformed into linguistic structures, is even more demanding. Here, learners must select appropriate vocabulary, apply correct grammatical rules, and organize syntax in ways that conform to the norms of the target language. This stage requires a strong interplay between working memory and long-term memory: working memory temporarily holds linguistic information while learners construct sentences, while long-term memory stores vocabulary items, grammar rules, and sociolinguistic conventions. When working memory capacity is limited as is often the case among FL learners sentence planning can become fragmented (Ahmadian, 2012). Learners may pause frequently, produce incomplete structures, or rely heavily on formulaic expressions. As a result, limited cognitive resources can restrict the complexity and accuracy of language production.

Articulation, the final stage, involves physically producing speech sounds or writing text. Although articulation is often viewed as a motor activity, it is tightly connected to cognitive processes (Ohala, 1981). For example, learners must monitor their own output in real time, detect errors, and make adjustments as needed. This monitoring process relies on executive control, specifically inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. In speech production, learners must also manage pronunciation challenges, intonation patterns, and fluency. If cognitive processing demands are too high, articulation tends to suffer, leading to slower speech, increased hesitation, and reduced intelligibility (Hammons, 2025). For FL learners who write instead of speak, articulation involves organizing text, applying conventions of academic or formal writing, and maintaining coherence tasks that also rely heavily on cognitive resources.

Another important aspect of the relationship between cognitive processes and language production is the role of attention. Attention influences what learners focus on during language production: form, meaning, or both. According to several models of second language acquisition, learners often face a trade-off between focusing on linguistic form and conveying meaning (Sun, B. & Révész, A., 2021). If their cognitive resources are limited, they may prioritize meaning at the expense of grammatical accuracy or, conversely, focus heavily on structure but fail to express ideas fluently. Attention also plays a major role in monitoring, self-

correction, and noticing errors. When learners are fatigued, distracted, or overwhelmed, their ability to attend to multiple aspects of language production diminishes, resulting in lower accuracy and fluency (Luquin, M., & García Mayo, M. del P., 2025).

Working memory also plays a central role in FL language production. Research has consistently shown that working memory capacity influences learners' ability to process linguistic information, maintain cohesion in discourse, and construct complex sentences. Learners with high working memory capacity tend to produce longer, more grammatically varied sentences, while those with lower capacity may rely on simple structures and repeat familiar patterns. Working memory is particularly important in tasks that require real-time production, such as spontaneous speaking, storytelling, and interactive communication (Schwering & MacDonald, 2020). In contrast, tasks that allow for more planning time such as writing may reduce the cognitive load but still demand considerable processing during editing and revision.

Long-term memory contributes to language production through the storage and retrieval of lexical items, collocations, grammar rules, and pragmatic conventions (Kostadinov, 2024). For FL learners, long-term memory may contain a smaller, less automatic repository of L2 knowledge, making retrieval slower and more effortful. This increased cognitive effort often results in delays, hesitations, or inaccurate language production. Moreover, L1 interference can disrupt retrieval processes, causing learners to use inappropriate word choices or apply L1 grammatical structures to L2 sentences. Therefore, the efficiency of long-term memory retrieval shapes the speed, accuracy, and naturalness of FL learners' language production.

The connection between cognitive processes and language production becomes even more evident when considering fluency. Fluency involves more than producing language quickly; it reflects the smooth coordination of cognitive processes, including rapid retrieval, simultaneous planning and production, and accurate monitoring. Fluent speakers are able to distribute cognitive resources efficiently, allowing them to handle complex tasks such as thinking ahead while speaking. In contrast, less fluent learners often struggle to balance these demands, leading to pauses, repetitions, and reformulations. This suggests that fluency is not merely a linguistic skill but also a cognitive one (Suzuki & Kormos, 2023).

Motivation, affective states, and anxiety further interact with cognitive processes. High anxiety, for example, can consume working memory resources and impair attention, making language production more difficult. Foreign language anxiety in speaking tasks is well-

documented and often manifests as performance breakdowns, even when learners possess adequate linguistic knowledge (Hajiyeva, 2024). Cognitive load theory also supports the idea that anxiety increases cognitive burden, reducing learners' ability to apply linguistic rules effectively. Thus, emotional and cognitive factors jointly influence language production outcomes.

Finally, the relationship between cognitive processes and language production has important implications for foreign language teaching. Understanding how cognitive limitations and strengths shape learners' performance can help teachers design more effective instructional activities. Activities that reduce cognitive load, such as scaffolding, modeling, pre-task planning, and chunking, can support learners in producing more accurate and complex language. Meanwhile, tasks that challenge working memory and encourage automatization such as repeated practice, fluency drills, and retrieval-based learning can strengthen cognitive foundations for language production.

language production in foreign language learners is deeply intertwined with multiple cognitive processes, including attention, working memory, long-term memory, and executive control. These cognitive mechanisms shape how learners conceptualize ideas, formulate sentences, and articulate messages. Understanding their interaction is crucial for explaining individual differences in learner performance and for designing instruction that supports more effective language production. This article therefore examines the relationship between cognitive processes and language production, highlighting how cognitive capacities influence fluency, accuracy, complexity, and overall communicative competence in foreign language learners.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the relationship between cognitive processes and language production among foreign language learners. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of the study lies in understanding internal experiences, mental strategies, and cognitive mechanisms that emerge during the production of language in real communication contexts. Unlike quantitative approaches that primarily measure outcomes, qualitative methods allow the researcher to capture the dynamic thinking processes, planning behaviors, and cognitive challenges that learners encounter while producing language.

The participants of this study consisted of university-level foreign language learners who had completed at least four semesters of language study. They were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed an intermediate level of proficiency. This proficiency level was considered ideal because learners had sufficient linguistic resources to express themselves, yet their cognitive processing during language production was still visible and analyzable. In total, approximately 10 to 15 participants took part in the study, a number deemed adequate for generating rich, detailed data while maintaining analytical depth. All participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, oral production tasks, and written production tasks designed to elicit both spontaneous and planned language.

Data were collected using three main techniques: in-depth interviews, task-based observations, and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions related to cognitive processing during language production. Questions focused on how learners planned their utterances, the strategies they used to compensate for limitations in working memory, and the factors they believed influenced their fluency and accuracy in speaking and writing. Observations were conducted while participants performed various language production tasks, such as describing images, narrating personal experiences, participating in pair discussions, or writing short essays. During these tasks, the researcher recorded observable indicators of cognitive load, including pauses, self-repair, hesitation, strategy use, and disruptions in fluency. Document analysis involved examining written texts produced by the participants to identify patterns in grammatical accuracy, sentence complexity, cohesion, vocabulary use, and overall clarity of ideas.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and relationships emerging from the dataset. Analysis began with the transcription of interviews and observation notes, followed by initial open coding to highlight categories related to cognitive processes such as working memory use, attention control, planning behaviors, monitoring, and decision-making. These categories were then refined and organized into broader thematic structures that reflected the interplay between cognitive processes and language production. This method allowed for a systematic yet flexible interpretation of the data, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' experiences while addressing the research focus.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, several validation strategies were applied, including triangulation, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings across interviews, observations, and written

documents, thereby reducing the risk of relying on a single source of evidence. Member checking involved sharing interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy and avoid researcher bias. The audit trail documented all analytical decisions, methodological notes, and reflective insights, ensuring transparency throughout the research process.

Through this methodological approach, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how cognitive processes operate during language production and how learners' cognitive strengths and limitations influence their fluency, accuracy, and complexity in foreign language use. The qualitative method enabled the researcher to uncover internal mechanisms that cannot be captured through numerical measurements, resulting in deeper insights into the relationship between cognition and language production.

## 3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a strong and intricate relationship between cognitive processes and language production among foreign language learners. Through in-depth interviews, task-based observations, and analysis of written documents, several key patterns emerged that demonstrate how working memory capacity, attentional control, and self-monitoring influence the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of learners' language performance. These cognitive processes shaped not only how learners planned and formulated their ideas but also how they managed the pressures of real-time communication.

One of the most prominent findings concerns the role of working memory. Learners with higher working memory capacity were consistently able to produce longer, more coherent utterances during speaking tasks, particularly when required to describe images or narrate short stories. For instance, during a picture description task, one participant explained the scene smoothly, saying, "The picture shows a family relaxing in their living room. The father is reading a magazine while the children are watching a cartoon on the laptop." This type of fluent and structured production contrasted sharply with the performance of participants who appeared to have lower working memory capacity. These learners frequently paused, repeated segments, or restarted sentences, often losing their original idea midway. One participant struggled through the same task, saying, "Uh… the family is… maybe… sitting in… living room… they are, um… doing something… I'm not sure." Such patterns indicate that holding conceptual information in mind while simultaneously constructing grammatical structures poses a substantial cognitive burden.

Attentional control also emerged as a central factor influencing the accuracy and clarity of language production. Many participants expressed difficulty maintaining attention on both meaning and form simultaneously. During interviews, several mentioned experiencing a trade-off between fluency and grammatical accuracy. One participant stated, "When I try to speak smoothly, I don't think about grammar at all. But when I try to focus on grammar, my speaking becomes slow and I lose my ideas." Observations during oral tasks confirmed this tension: learners who prioritized meaning often produced fluent but grammatically inconsistent speech, whereas those who attempted to monitor grammar closely tended to slow down significantly, often producing fragmented sentences. This reflects well-known limitations in attentional capacity, where learners cannot allocate full attention to two cognitively demanding tasks at once.

The findings further highlight the importance of monitoring in language production. Learners frequently engaged in self-correction, particularly during speaking tasks. Some corrected errors immediately after producing them, as one participant demonstrated: "She don't—she doesn't like social gatherings." This type of monitoring suggests awareness of linguistic accuracy, yet it was also evident that frequent corrections disrupted fluency. Participants who monitored excessively often paused for long periods or abandoned sentences midway. One participant noted during the interview, "I know when I'm making a mistake, but when I stop to fix it, my mind goes blank, and I forget what I want to say next." This illustrates how self-monitoring, although useful for improving accuracy, can simultaneously increase cognitive load and hinder real-time communication.

The analysis of written documents showed a different pattern of cognitive engagement. In writing tasks, most participants produced sentences that were structurally more complex compared to their spoken output. This can be attributed to the additional time available for planning, searching for vocabulary, and revising. For example, one participant wrote, "Although I sometimes struggle to recall the correct vocabulary, I usually try to rephrase my sentences so that my ideas remain clear and connected." Such written sentences displayed subordinate clauses, cohesive devices, and more precise word choice features that were rarely present in their oral production. This supports the notion that writing allows learners to offload some cognitive demands by distributing processing over time.

Another finding from the study concerns cognitive compensation strategies that learners employed when faced with limitations in memory, attention, or lexical access. Several participants relied on simplified vocabulary, general nouns, or repetition to maintain the flow

of communication. For example, one learner often resorted to phrases such as "the thing," "something like that," or "you know," whenever they could not retrieve the exact word. Others avoided complex grammatical structures, opting for short, simple sentences instead. During a discussion task, one participant said, "I want to explain more, but I think if I use a long sentence, I will get confused, so I try to keep it short." These strategies indicate that learners are aware of their cognitive constraints and attempt to manage them by adjusting linguistic choices.

When the findings are examined collectively, several important interpretations emerge. First, working memory clearly serves as a foundational mechanism in language production. The ability to hold ideas in mind while simultaneously constructing linguistic forms determines whether learners can produce coherent and fluent speech. When working memory is limited, learners prioritize simpler structures to reduce cognitive strain. This explains why some participants frequently produced incomplete sentences or relied heavily on pauses when attempting to express more complex ideas.

Attentional control further shapes how learners distribute cognitive resources when speaking or writing. The consistent tension between fluency and accuracy observed in this study reinforces the idea that learners must constantly negotiate which aspect of language production to prioritize in real time. Those who attempted to divide attention equally often experienced performance breakdowns. The findings suggest that language production is not merely the retrieval of stored linguistic knowledge but a dynamic process requiring ongoing attentional decisions.

Self-monitoring plays a dual role in this system. On the one hand, it supports accuracy and helps learners refine their output. On the other hand, over-monitoring increases cognitive load, especially in spontaneous speech. This helps explain why learners often perform better in writing tasks: the monitoring process is still present but occurs without the pressure of immediate production.

Differences between spoken and written performance further highlight the influence of time constraints on cognitive processing. Writing enables learners to compensate for limited working memory by externalizing language that is, putting ideas on paper before forming complete structures. In contrast, speaking requires learners to plan and produce simultaneously, exposing limitations in cognitive capacity more clearly.

The use of compensation strategies among participants can also be seen as evidence of adaptive cognitive behavior. Rather than viewing these strategies as weaknesses, they reveal

how learners cope with cognitive demands during language production. Avoiding complex structures, using general vocabulary, or reformulating ideas are deliberate choices that reduce cognitive load while maintaining communicative intent.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that linguistic performance cannot be separated from cognitive functioning. Learners with stronger cognitive capacities generally produced more fluent, accurate, and complex language, while those with more limited cognitive resources relied on compensatory behaviors to sustain communication. This supports the idea that effective language production is not solely a result of linguistic competence but an outcome of how cognitive processes interact with linguistic knowledge during real-time communication.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that cognitive processes play a central and influential role in shaping language production among foreign language learners. Working memory, attentional control, and self-monitoring emerged as major determinants of how learners plan, construct, and express their ideas in both spoken and written forms. Learners with stronger cognitive capacity were consistently able to produce more fluent, accurate, and structurally complex language, whereas those with more limited capacity showed patterns of hesitation, simplification, and reliance on compensatory strategies. These findings highlight that language production is not simply the retrieval of linguistic knowledge but a cognitively demanding activity that requires the simultaneous management of linguistic, conceptual, and attentional resources. The contrast between spoken and written performance further illustrates how time pressure and real-time demands intensify the cognitive load in oral production, making cognitive limitations more visible.Moreover, the results underscore the importance of understanding cognitive factors when designing pedagogical approaches for foreign language learning. Teachers and curriculum designers should consider incorporating tasks that support cognitive development, such as memory-enhancing activities, controlled attention tasks, and opportunities for guided self-monitoring. Helping learners recognize and refine their compensatory strategies may also improve their ability to cope with cognitive demands during communication. Ultimately, this study suggests that fostering cognitive awareness and strengthening cognitive skills can significantly enhance learners' language production abilities. By acknowledging the interplay between cognition and language, educators can develop more effective and supportive learning environments that align with learners' cognitive profiles. The study provides a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between cognitive

functioning and language output, opening avenues for further research on how cognitive training can be integrated into foreign language pedagogy.

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