

SELF-REGULATED WRITING STRATEGY USE AMONG EFL LEARNERS AT AN ENGLISH CENTER IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study examined self-regulated writing strategy use among 432 EFL learners enrolled in TOEIC preparation courses at a private English center in Vietnam. Quantitative data were collected from an adapted version of the Questionnaire for Self-Regulated Learning Writing Strategies, and analyzed by descriptive statistics and independent-samples *t*-tests. Results indicated that cognitive and social strategies were most frequently used, while self-consequence and monitoring strategies were least used. Female learners used metacognitive and cognitive strategies more frequently than male learners; intermediate-level learners used these strategies more frequently than elementary-level learners. No significant differences were found in the use of social or motivational/affective strategies across genders and proficiency levels. These findings highlight the need for explicit self-regulatory writing instruction in Vietnamese EFL classrooms, particularly for elementary-level and male learners.

Keywords: Self-regulated learning; writing strategies; EFL learners; TOEIC; language center

CHIẾN LƯỢC VIẾT TỰ ĐIỀU CHỈNH CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRUNG TÂM NGOẠI NGỮ TẠI VIỆT NAM

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu khảo sát việc sử dụng các chiến lược viết tự điều chỉnh của 432 học viên luyện thi TOEIC tại một trung tâm Anh ngữ tư nhân tại Việt Nam. Dữ liệu định lượng được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi hiệu chỉnh và được phân tích bằng thống kê mô tả và kiểm định *t* độc lập. Kết quả cho thấy, các chiến lược nhận thức và chiến lược xã hội được dùng nhiều nhất, trong khi các chiến lược tự hệ quả và giám sát bản thân được sử dụng ít nhất. Học viên nữ sử dụng chiến lược siêu nhận thức và nhận thức nhiều hơn học viên nam; học viên trình độ trung cấp sử dụng các chiến lược này thường xuyên hơn so với học viên trình độ sơ cấp. Không có sự khác biệt đáng kể nào về các chiến lược xã hội hoặc điều chỉnh động lực cảm xúc giữa hai giới tính và trình độ. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc hướng dẫn tường minh về chiến lược viết tự điều chỉnh tại các lớp học ở Việt Nam, đặc biệt đối với học viên nam và học viên trình độ sơ cấp.

Từ khóa: Học tập tự điều chỉnh; chiến lược viết; người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ; TOEIC; trung tâm ngoại ngữ

1. Introduction

Writing is widely regarded as one of the most cognitively demanding skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly at elementary and intermediate levels (Wang et al., 2023). Unlike receptive skills such as reading and listening, writing requires learners to manage idea generation, grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, and discourse organization within a given task. In English language centers in Vietnam, learners frequently encounter difficulties in constructing coherent arguments, structuring multi-paragraph texts, applying appropriate grammatical forms, and sustaining motivation throughout writing tasks (Fan & Wang, 2024). Such difficulties are compounded in TOEIC preparation, where learners are expected to produce written output under pressure while meeting specific task demands. Vietnamese researchers have attributed these challenges to inadequate strategy use, limited learner autonomy, and poor time management across proficiency levels (Le, 2013; Nguyen, 2009; Tran, 2021).

The growing interest in self-regulated learning (SRL) has led to increasing research on learners' strategic behavior across different language skills. In the Vietnamese context, recent studies have begun to examine metacognitive and self-regulated strategy use in reading, particularly in English for Specific Purposes contexts (Nguyen et al., 2026), highlighting the importance of strategic regulation in language learning. Research on SRL in writing has also emerged, focusing primarily on university students (Le & Tran, 2021; Tran, 2021; Vu et al., 2022). However, empirical evidence regarding self-regulated writing strategies among learners outside higher education, particularly those studying in non-university settings, remains limited. This gap warrants further investigation because it can reveal whether certain learner groups are at a strategic disadvantage and may help inform more targeted and differentiated writing instruction.

To address this gap, the present study investigates self-regulated writing (SRW) strategy use among EFL learners in TOEIC preparation courses at a private English center in Vietnam, examining which strategies are most and least frequently employed and whether differences exist across gender and proficiency levels. The findings aim to inform writing pedagogy in Vietnamese EFL contexts by identifying strategic gaps and learner groups most in need of support. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What self-regulated writing strategies are most and least frequently used by EFL learners?
- (2) Are there any significant differences in the use of self-regulated writing strategies between male and female learners?
- (3) Are there any significant differences in the use of self-regulated writing strategies across proficiency levels (elementary and intermediate)?

2. Literature review

2.1 Self-regulated learning

Self-regulated learning (SRL) has its roots in educational psychology and has grown into a field since the 1970s. At its core, SRL refers to the extent to which learners actively participate in and take ownership of their own learning. Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) conceptualized SRL as a dynamic process in which learners deploy strategic efforts to manage their achievement through specific beliefs and cognitive processes. Dörnyei (2005) described SRL as consisting of

cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral components that allow individuals to adapt their behaviors and goals in response to changing environmental conditions.

Schunk and Zimmerman (2011) argued that self-regulated learners intentionally activate, sustain, and adjust their cognition, affect, and behavior to attain learning goals through the use of strategies. Oxford (2013) further emphasized that SRL strategies operate across multiple dimensions, including metacognition, social interaction, and motivational regulation, enabling learners to manage their internal mental states, beliefs, and learning environments (Andrade & Evans, 2012; Zimmerman, 2013).

Zimmerman and Pons (1986) identified 14 categories of SRL strategies, including self-evaluation, goal setting, self-monitoring, and social assistance seeking, through structured interviews with elementary and secondary students. Their findings showed that among gender, socioeconomic status, and SRL use, SRL strategies were the strongest predictor of academic achievement. Subsequent research has consistently confirmed that individual differences in motivation, self-efficacy, and emotion significantly shape how learners deploy these strategies (Boekaerts, 2011; Zimmerman, 2008).

2.2 Language learning strategies and SRL

The study of language learning strategies (LLSs) has a well-established tradition stemming from the foundational work of Rubin (1975), and subsequent research has consistently linked LLS use with language achievement (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). However, this body of research has faced criticisms regarding definitional inconsistency, inadequate theorizing, and the lack of psychometrically validated instruments (Dörnyei, 2005; Tseng et al., 2006). In response, scholars have proposed reframing LLSs within an SRL framework, treating them as goal-directed, self-regulated activities rather than isolated behaviors (Pintrich, 2000).

This reconceptualization has proven productive. Tseng et al. (2006), for instance, developed a vocabulary learning scale grounded in SRL principles, validating a five-factor model encompassing commitment control, emotional control, metacognitive control, satiation control, and environment control. Their study demonstrated the suitability of applying self-regulation constructs to specific language skill areas. More broadly, researchers have argued that both SRL and LLS frameworks share an emphasis on cognitive, metacognitive, social-behavioral, and motivational dimensions, making SRL a particularly appropriate lens through which to examine second language (L2) writing, where learners must manage content generation, linguistic choices, and motivational challenges (Zhang et al., 2016).

2.3 L2 writing strategies and SRL

Second language (L2) writing research has been strongly informed by first language (L1) writing theory, particularly the cognitive process model proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981), which conceptualizes writing as a recursive process involving planning, translating, and reviewing. Building on this foundation, subsequent studies classified writing strategies across stages such as pre-writing, drafting, and revision (Sasaki, 2000; Victori, 1999). Later work expanded these classifications to incorporate social and affective dimensions. For instance, Leki (1995) proposed a sociocognitive taxonomy that includes peer interaction, teacher feedback use,

and self-management, reflecting the view that writing is not only a cognitive activity but also a socially and motivationally situated process.

More recent research has situated writing strategies within self-regulated learning (SRL) frameworks. Cumming et al. (2002) conceptualized writing strategies as goal-directed actions, including peer learning, resource use, and self-regulation, which closely align with the SRL categories identified by Zimmerman and Pons (1986). Empirical studies have also shown that language proficiency shapes strategy use, with higher-proficiency learners demonstrating more flexible and varied strategy repertoires (Zhang et al., 2016). In response to limitations in earlier qualitative research, recent scholarship has emphasized the use of validated instruments to examine strategy use on a large scale (Petrić & Czár, 2003). Following this direction, the present study adopts a self-regulated writing (SRW) perspective and employs the Questionnaire for Self-Regulated Learning Writing Strategies (QSRLWS) (Shen & Wang, 2025) to examine learners' regulation of cognitive, metacognitive, social, and motivational processes.

2.4 Previous studies

Recent research in L2 writing highlights a complex, multidimensional framework of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies and consistently shows that greater strategy use predicts better writing outcomes. For instance, Wang et al. (2023) confirmed a hierarchical four-factor model of SRL writing strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, social, and motivational), aligning with earlier frameworks (cf. Teng & Zhang, 2020). Similarly, Teng and Zhang (2020) demonstrated that SRL-based writing instruction improved students' composition scores and expanded their use of diverse strategies. Empirical studies further support this relationship. Wang et al. (2023) found that frequent use of goal-setting, planning, monitoring, and motivational strategies significantly enhanced writing performance, while Alanazi (2020) reported that planning and feedback-related strategies strongly predicted EFL students' writing achievement. Overall, active self-regulation is closely associated with improved L2 writing outcomes across contexts.

Contextual factors also influence how learners employ SRL strategies. In an online EFL writing course, Tian et al. (2022) observed that students used more cognitive strategies when responding to automated feedback but relied more on motivational strategies when engaging with teacher feedback. Likewise, Vu et al. (2022) found that Vietnamese students with more positive attitudes toward written corrective feedback demonstrated stronger engagement in SRL strategies. Within Vietnam, Tran (2021) reported that English-major freshmen exhibited moderate SRL strategy use but struggled with time management, strategy selection, and motivational control. Other studies, such as Nguyen and Phuong (2022), showed that higher SRL strategy use, particularly environmental and help-seeking strategies, was associated with better writing performance. These findings suggest that while Vietnamese learners actively use a range of SRL strategies, contextual elements such as feedback type and learning conditions shape their strategic behavior.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to systematically examine how EFL learners employ self-regulated writing strategies in the context of TOEIC preparation courses. A

quantitative approach was selected as it aligned with the study's aim of systematically measuring self-regulated writing (SRW) strategy use and examining potential variations across learner groups. This approach enabled the collection of numerical data on strategy frequency and supported statistical comparisons based on learner characteristics such as gender and proficiency level, thereby ensuring objective and generalizable findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Setting and participants

The study was conducted at a private English center in Vietnam offering TOEIC preparation courses for university learners. Each course lasted two months, with three 90-minute sessions per week, and classes were organized by proficiency level (elementary and intermediate), with approximately 90 learners per course. Instruction was delivered face-to-face, focusing on TOEIC-related language skills, particularly on writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Writing instruction emphasized sentence and paragraph construction, error correction, and timed writing tasks simulating test conditions. Teachers provided in-class feedback and model answers, which learners used to revise their work. Within this context, learners regularly engaged in self-regulated writing processes, including goal setting, planning, monitoring, and revising. Outside class, they completed additional writing tasks, reviewed model responses, and tracked their own progress, creating a structured yet autonomous learning environment conducive to examining self-regulated strategy use.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, which was appropriate given the researcher's direct access to the target classes during the instructional period (Dörnyei, 2007). A total of 432 learners from 18 TOEIC preparation classes participated in the study. Of these, 256 learners (59.3%) were at the elementary level and 176 (40.7%) at the intermediate level, based on the center's internal placement system. In terms of gender distribution, 185 participants were male (42.8%) and 247 were female (57.2%), providing a sufficiently diverse sample for comparative analysis.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

Variables	Groups	N	%
Proficiency Level	Elementary	256	59.3
	Intermediate	176	40.7
Gender	Male	185	42.8
	Female	247	57.2
Total		432	100

3.3 Data collection

The research instrument was an adapted version of the Questionnaire for Self-Regulated Learning Writing Strategies for EFL learners, originally developed and validated by Shen and Wang (2025). It consisted of two parts: Part A collected background information (e.g., gender and proficiency level), while Part B included 44 items across 12 subcategories within four strategy clusters: metacognitive, cognitive, social, and motivational/affective regulation. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, reviewed by an applied linguistics expert, and piloted with 25 similar learners. Reliability analysis showed acceptable internal consistency, with

Cronbach's alpha ranging from .70 to .86 in the pilot and .740 to .833 in the main study ($N = 432$). Following ethical approval and informed consent, the questionnaire was administered to participants across 18 TOEIC classes during regular sessions, requiring approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. To address the first question, descriptive statistics were computed for the 12 strategy subcategories and 44 individual items, followed by one-sample t -tests comparing each mean to the neutral midpoint (test value = 3.0) to determine whether strategy use differed significantly from a moderate level. To examine gender differences, independent-samples t -tests were conducted. Levene's test was used to assess the equality of variances, and effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's guidelines ($d = .20$, small; $d = .50$, medium; $d = .80$, large). Finally, proficiency-level differences were analyzed using independent-samples t -tests, with effect sizes again reported using Cohen's d ; a significance level of $p < .05$ was applied across all inferential analyses.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Frequency of self-regulated writing strategy use

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all 12 SRW strategy subcategories across the four main clusters.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of SRW Strategy Use by Subcategory ($N = 432$)

Clusters	Subcategories	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Metacognitive	Strategy Investigation	3.35	0.753
	Planning	3.12	0.781
	Monitoring & Evaluating	2.97	0.747
Cognitive	Reviewing	3.76	0.743
	Text Generation	3.93	0.715
	Resource Use	4.22	0.740
Social	Seeking Assistance & Collaboration	4.30	0.631
	Affective Management	3.61	0.750
Motivational/ Affective Regulation	Intrinsic Engagement	3.64	0.776
	Mastery Self-Talk	3.51	0.743
	Emotion Control	3.39	0.805
	Self-Consequence	2.85	0.684

4.1.1 Most frequently used strategies

The results indicate that cognitive and social strategies were the most frequently used. Among all 12 subcategories, Seeking Assistance and Collaboration recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.631$), followed by Resource Use ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.740$) and Text Generation ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.715$). At the item level, the most frequently endorsed behaviors included seeking feedback from teachers and peers, using Internet and dictionary resources during writing, and referring to model texts as linguistic input.

These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that EFL learners at lower and intermediate proficiency levels tend to rely on external resources and social interaction to

compensate for limited internal linguistic knowledge (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Within the SRL framework proposed by Zimmerman (2000) and elaborated by Graham (2018), such behaviors reflect the resource management and social support dimensions of self-regulation.

Importantly, within the context of a private TOEIC-oriented language center, the prominence of these strategies may also be shaped by the instructional environment. Writing instruction in such settings often emphasizes accuracy, model-based learning, and teacher feedback, which can encourage learners to depend on external input rather than independently regulate their writing processes. The frequent use of dictionaries, online tools, and peer or teacher assistance may therefore reflect not only developmental needs but also pedagogical practices that prioritize guided performance over autonomous strategy use. This pattern is consistent with findings from Nguyen and Phuong (2022), who reported that Vietnamese EFL learners frequently employ environmental structuring strategies in similarly structured learning contexts.

4.1.2 Least frequently used strategies

In contrast, self-consequence received the lowest mean score across all subcategories ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.684$), followed closely by Monitoring and Evaluating ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.747$). At the item level, “I punish myself when my writing performance is not satisfactory” recorded the lowest mean ($M = 2.60$), while “I read my essay aloud to look for mistakes” was also among the least frequently endorsed behaviors ($M = 2.69$).

The low endorsement of these strategies suggests a limited development of internal self-regulatory capacity among the learners. Self-consequence strategies are conceptualized as key motivational/affective control mechanisms in the SRL taxonomy proposed by Zimmerman and Pons (1986) while monitoring and evaluation are considered central to effective self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011). Their underuse in the present study aligns with Tran (2021), who found that Vietnamese EFL learners often struggle to sustain motivation and regulate their own learning processes during writing tasks.

From a contextual perspective, this pattern may be partly attributed to the instructional characteristics of TOEIC-oriented programs. Writing tasks in such settings are typically time-constrained and product-focused, with limited emphasis on revision, reflection, or self-assessment. As a result, learners may have fewer opportunities to develop metacognitive awareness or engage in self-evaluative practices. The particularly low endorsement of behaviors such as reading one's own writing aloud suggests that revision has not yet been internalized as a habitual strategy. This interpretation is consistent with Cuenca-Carlino et al. (2018) and Le and Tran (2021), who argue that without explicit instruction and structured opportunities for reflection, learners are unlikely to develop higher-order self-regulatory strategies independently.

4.2 Gender differences in SRW strategy use

Table 3 presents the results of the independent-samples *t*-tests comparing male and female learners' SRW strategy use.

Table 3*Gender Differences in SRW Strategy Use*

Clusters	Male <i>M</i>	Female <i>M</i>	Mean Diff.	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Metacognitive	3.03	3.24	-0.212	-3.460	430	.001*	-0.336
Cognitive	3.85	4.06	-0.211	-3.590	430	<.001*	-0.349
Social	4.00	3.92	0.081	1.738	430	.083	0.169
Motivational/Affective	3.31	3.37	-0.063	-1.735	430	.083	-0.169

Significant gender differences were found for metacognitive strategies ($t(430) = -3.460$, $p = .001$) and cognitive strategies ($t(430) = -3.590$, $p < .001$), with female learners reporting higher use in both clusters (metacognitive: $M_{\text{female}} = 3.24$ vs. $M_{\text{male}} = 3.03$; cognitive: $M_{\text{female}} = 4.06$ vs. $M_{\text{male}} = 3.85$). Effect sizes for both were small (Cohen's $d = -0.336$ and -0.349 , respectively). No significant differences were found for social strategies ($p = .083$) or motivational/affective regulation strategies ($p = .083$).

The present findings suggest that gender differences in SRL are more selective than global, with female learners showing an advantage mainly in internal, process-oriented regulation, such as metacognitive and cognitive strategies. This pattern is broadly consistent with prior research showing that girls and women often report stronger writing self-efficacy, self-regulatory efficacy, and greater use of cognitive or organizing strategies, although such differences may diminish when gender-role beliefs are taken into account (Ho & Thanh, 2015; Pajares & Valiante, 1999). At the same time, the absence of significant differences in social and motivational/affective regulation supports the view that gender effects in SRL are domain-specific rather than pervasive, a conclusion that also aligns with studies reporting little or no overall gender gap in SRL strategy use in other educational contexts (Fettahlioglu, 2011; Teng & Zhang, 2016).

The small effect sizes observed here further indicate that gender explains only a modest proportion of variance, suggesting that instructional support should be directed at strengthening planning, monitoring, and text-generation for all learners rather than treating these capacities as inherently gendered. From a theoretical perspective, the results reinforce SRL as a multidimensional system in which metacognitive and cognitive regulation are especially sensitive to self-monitoring and self-efficacy processes, whereas social and motivational regulation may be less differentiated by gender (Akamatsu et al., 2019; Panadero, 2017). In practical terms, the findings imply that strategy instruction should be designed to reduce the gap in process-oriented regulation, particularly by scaffolding planning, monitoring, and strategic text production for both male and female learners.

4.3 Proficiency-level differences in SRW strategy use

Table 4 presents the independent-samples t -test results comparing elementary- and intermediate-level learners across the four strategy clusters.

Table 4*Proficiency-Level Differences in SRW Strategy Use*

Cluster	Elem. M	Inter. M	Mean Diff.	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Metacognitive	3.05	3.29	-0.244	-3.970	430	<.001*	-0.389
Cognitive	3.86	4.13	-0.266	-4.537	430	<.001*	-0.444
Social	3.97	3.92	0.053	1.128	430	.260	0.110
Motivational/Affective	3.33	3.37	-0.037	-1.018	430	.309	-0.100

Proficiency differences were found for metacognitive strategies ($t(430) = -3.970, p < .001, d = -0.389$) and cognitive strategies ($t(430) = -4.537, p < .001, d = -0.444$), with intermediate learners reporting higher use in both clusters. The effect size for cognitive strategies approached a small-to-medium magnitude, indicating a more substantive gap between proficiency groups in this domain than in the metacognitive cluster.

Proficiency differences emerged most clearly in metacognitive and cognitive strategy use, suggesting that stronger linguistic competence is associated with more advanced self-regulatory control during writing. This pattern can be interpreted as evidence that SRL develops in a differentiated way: as learners gain more language resources, they are better able to allocate attention to planning, monitoring, revising, and text generation, which are core components of cognitive and metacognitive regulation in writing. This interpretation is consistent with multidimensional SRL models that distinguish cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral-emotional components rather than treating SRL as a single undifferentiated capacity (Panadero, 2017; Teng & Zhang, 2016). The relatively larger gap in cognitive strategy use further implies that proficiency may be especially important for strategies requiring simultaneous management of content, language form, and task demands, whereas metacognitive regulation appears to develop in parallel but somewhat less strongly.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that elementary-level TOEIC writing instruction should not focus only on language accuracy but should also include explicit scaffolding for cognitive strategy use, such as reviewing, drafting, reorganizing ideas, and drawing on resources strategically. Prior intervention studies indicate that strategy-based instruction and feedback-oriented support can strengthen SRL writing behaviors, improve writing quality, and foster more adaptive motivational beliefs, which means that instruction can help compensate for the weaker strategy profile typically seen at lower proficiency levels (Vu et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). The absence of significant proficiency differences in social and motivational/affective strategies further suggests that these dimensions may be less tied to language growth itself and more dependent on learner disposition or classroom ecology, so they may need to be developed through separate pedagogical supports rather than assumed to improve automatically with proficiency gains.

5. Conclusion

This study examined self-regulated writing strategy use among 432 Vietnamese EFL learners in TOEIC preparation courses at a private English center using the QSRLWS framework (Shen & Wang, 2025). Results showed that cognitive and social strategies, particularly resource use and seeking assistance, were most frequently employed, whereas self-consequence, monitoring, and evaluating were least used, indicating a gap between externally supported

behaviors and internal self-regulation. Female and intermediate-level learners reported higher use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies than male and elementary-level peers, although effect sizes were small to moderate. No significant differences were found in social or motivational/affective strategies. These findings suggest that learners in TOEIC-oriented contexts rely more on externally mediated strategies than on internally driven regulation.

The study contributes to SRL theory by demonstrating how test-oriented instructional environments shape patterns of strategy use. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for more explicit and systematic integration of self-regulated writing strategies into classroom instruction. Teachers in TOEIC-oriented programs may consider incorporating guided strategy training, such as modeling planning and revision processes, using think-aloud protocols, and providing structured opportunities for self-monitoring and reflection. In addition, writing tasks can be designed to move beyond controlled, sentence-level practice toward more extended and process-oriented activities that encourage drafting, revising, and self-evaluation. Providing formative feedback that prompts learners to reflect on their writing process, rather than focusing solely on accuracy, may further support the development of internal regulation. Special attention should also be given to lower-proficiency and male learners, who may benefit from additional scaffolding and targeted strategy instruction.

However, the study is limited by its reliance on self-report data, convenience sampling from a single center, and a restricted proficiency range. Future research using mixed-methods or longitudinal designs across broader proficiency levels is recommended.

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