CHOICE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY OF PROFICIENT AND LESS PROFICIENT EFL STUDENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPEAKING SKILLS OF AN INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

Language instructors continuously look for various methods to support the learners' development of speaking skills. With this challenge in mind, it is important for both language learners and instructors to find out the most effective language learning strategies. This study aims to explore the choice of language learning strategies employed by both proficient and less proficient EFL students in the development of speaking skills within a 12-week Intensive English Programme (IVEP). A total of 10 learners from Pre-Intermediate level participated in this research. Questionnaire was used as a quantitative method to find out the selection of language learning strategies employed by both groups in the development of speaking skills. Interview was employed as a qualitative method to explore reasons why specific language learning strategies were chosen. The findings show that social strategies were frequently employed by both proficient and less proficient EFL learners. Other contributing factors such as the types of speaking task and instrumental motivation had great impact on the selections of language learning strategies among the learners. This research indicates that the choice of language learning strategies is mainly determined by the nature of the speaking tasks.

Keywords: *Development in speaking skills, language learning strategies, proficiency.*

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies are particularly important to encourage learners to cultivate greater self-motivation in the development of speaking skills. The type of learning strategy employed by learners differs from one individual to another because of individual preferences. Advancement in technology provides learners easier access to language learning topics or strategies for improving their language skills, especially speaking skills.

As far as government policy is concerned, English is regarded as an important element in support of the growth of the nation. However, proficiency in English among language learners is still questionable. Young graduates often struggle to get their ideas across in spoken English (Zakaria, 2008). A "culture of shyness" is still present among learners because they are afraid of making errors while presenting in front of other classmates. For this reason, the learners choose to remain silent rather than to risk embarrassment (Talib, 2009).

There is a direct correlation between a student's use of language learning strategies and language proficiency (Oxford, 2001). This correlation can be determined by using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, Oxford, 1990b). SILL has been extensively adopted by researchers around the world as an instrument to indicate high validity, reliability and utility (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Wharton, 2000; Kaur, 2003; Rajak, 2004). Hence, language learning strategies are essential in helping learners to solve language-learning problems or accomplish a language task within the given time. For this reason, this investigation was carried out with hopes of guiding language instructors at a tertiary institution to explore the language learning strategies that EFL learners have chosen to develop their speaking skills within a twelve-week Intensive English Programme (IVEP).

Research Objective

The purpose of this research is to identify language learning strategies used by both proficient and less proficient EFL learners in their speaking tasks within a twelve-week Intensive English Programme at a university college.

Research Questions

Based on the research objective, the research questions for this study are:

1. What is the most frequently used learning strategy adopted by the proficient EFL learners in their speaking tasks?
2. What is the most frequently used learning strategy adopted by the less proficient EFL learners in their speaking tasks?
3. What are the reasons for the choice of learning strategies by proficient and less proficient EFL learners?
4. What are the pedagogical implications on the development of speaking skills in IVEP?

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to Pre-Intermediate learners who had received at least twelve years of English instruction in both primary and secondary schools at the time of this research. The total number of participants is limited to 10. SILL questionnaires were given to these 10 participants. The same 10 participants provided their respective explanations through the interview sessions. Hence, the findings of this study are not applicable to all students in this learning institution.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for language instructors and curriculum designers to identify the frequency with which the language learning strategies are used by both proficient and less proficient EFL learners in this Intensive English Programme so that instructors and designers alike can customise their pedagogical approaches and develop more appropriate learning materials and activities for speaking tasks. Apart from the frequency of use, this study is also essential for the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of why some language learning strategies are chosen for a particular speaking task. Furthermore, this study provides a platform for the researchers to look at the comparative analysis between two groups of varying proficiency levels in relation to their choice of language learning strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interest and research in language learning strategies have a long history that extends way back into the 1970s. Along the way, many researchers have attempted to offer a definition of "language learning strategies". Rubin (1975) defines them as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge." Rigney (1978) conceives of strategies as practices that learners adopt in the process of learning and using new information. Later, Oxford (1990b) offers a much more relatable definition that has become the foundation for many subsequent inquiries into the use of language learning strategies in pedagogy. She defines them as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford). This research likewise adopts this definition of language learning strategies.

Language learning strategies are particularly important to encourage learners to develop greater self-motivation in the development of speaking skills. With the advancement in technology, learners can easily gain access to resources beyond the classroom for improving their language skills, especially speaking skills. Nevertheless, the type of learning strategy employed by learners differs from one individual to another because of individual preferences. Synthesizing research work done in the area of learning strategies, Oxford (1990a) identified eight common factors that influence students' choice of learning strategies when learning a second language: motivation, gender, cultural background, attitudes and beliefs, type of task, age and L2 stage, learning style, and tolerance of ambiguity. Therefore, the current research considers students' choice of language learning skills based on the type of task by focusing solely on speaking tasks.

Following up from work done by Naiman et al. (1978), O'Malley and Chamot (1990) proposed three categories of language learning strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, and social / affective. Oxford (1990b) subsequently proposed another set of language learning strategies consisting of six categories subdivided into two major groups: direct and indirect. Direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies; indirect strategies include metacognitive, affective, and social. Although there is some degree of overlap with O'Malley and Chamot's model (1978), Oxford's (1990b) has proven to be more comprehensive and extensive.

Oxford (2001) also indicated a direct correlation between a student's language learning strategy and language proficiency. This correlation can be determined by using Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). SILL has been extensively

adopted by researchers around the world as an instrument to indicate high validity, reliability and utility (Bremner, 1998; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Park, 1997; Sheorey, 1999; Wharton, 2000), and it is also the primary tool used in the current research. Using Oxford's SILL to study the use of language learning strategy among ESL students enrolled in an intensive English learning context, Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) discovered a curvilinear relationship between strategy use and language proficiency—students at intermediate level of proficiency reported wider use of the strategies, a finding that echoes Phillips's (1991) work. They also discovered that students at the beginning and intermediate levels prefer to use metacognitive strategies. However, Hong-Nam and Leavell's (2006) finding is not task- or skill-specific.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive research as it aims to describe what language learning strategies were used by proficient and less proficient participants in speaking tasks and the reasons why they chose and/or preferred a certain language learning strategies to others in the development of speaking skills.

Participants

Participants in this study were 10 first-year, first-semester diploma students majoring in culinary arts and patisserie. All participants had received at least twelve years of English instruction in primary and secondary schools at the time of this study. The English proficiency levels of the participants were determined by scores on the university's English Placement Test (EPT). Students with an EPT score range of 0 to 50 were categorised under Pre-Intermediate level, those with a score range of 51 to 64 under Intermediate level while those with a score range of 65 to 75 under Advanced level. The EPT scores for all the participants were 50 and below. Therefore, all of them enrolled in the IVEP at the Pre-Intermediate level. In order to differentiate between proficient and less proficient participants at the Pre-Intermediate level, participants with a score below 43 were considered as less proficient while participants with a score range of 43 to 50 were considered as proficient.

Research Instruments

In order to collect the data needed for this study, questionnaires and interviews were the main instruments used. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was used as the questionnaire to find out the language learning strategies used by proficient and less proficient participants to develop their speaking skills. Interview was used to determine the participants' reasons for using the selected language learning strategies.

For the questionnaire, Oxford's (1990b) SILL version 7.0 that contains 50 items was selected as the instrument for assessing the language learning strategies used by the participants in improving their speaking skills. The questionnaire consisted of six parts: (a) remembering more effectively (memory strategies), (b) using mental processes (cognitive strategies), (c) compensating for missing knowledge (compensation strategies), (d) organising and evaluating learning (metacognitive strategies), (e) managing emotions

(affective strategies), and (f) learning with others (social strategies). Participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 "never or almost never" to 5 "always or almost always". The average for each strategy was then calculated to determine the strategies that were most frequently and least frequently used by each participant.

Interviews with both proficient and less proficient participants were also conducted to obtain the reasons for the participants' choice of learning strategies. The responses were then transcribed and analysed.

Research Procedure and Data Collection

The class instructor administered the questionnaire to the participants during a regular class period (May Trimester 2017). The participants were then told that there were no right or wrong answers to any questions. They were also informed that their confidentiality was secured and that their responses would be used for research purposes only. Furthermore, they were assured that their participation would not affect their grades. All participants chose to fill out the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the findings about the language learning strategies used by proficient and less proficient participants in speaking tasks and the reasons for their choices of strategies.

The Overall Use of Language Learning Strategies

The overall use of language learning strategies by the participants is presented in Table 1. Descriptive statistics (in percentages) was employed to describe the frequency with which each language learning strategy was used.

Table 1: Overall Strategy Use

Participant	Part A Memory	Part B Cognitive	Part C Compensatory	Part D Metacognitive	Part E Affective	Part F Social
1	2.67	3.5	3.33	3.33	2.67	3.83
2	2.67	2.86	2.5	3.44	3.17	3.5
3	2.78	2.14	2.33	2.67	2.33	2.83
4	2.44	2.64	2.67	2.89	2.67	2
5	2.67	3.07	3	2.89	2.33	2.83
6	3.44	3.57	3.33	3.22	2.83	3.67
7	3.22	3.14	3.17	2.89	3	3.17
8	2.44	2.21	3	2.56	2.33	2.5
9	3.11	3.57	4	4.67	3.5	3.33
10	2.67	3.29	4.17	3.56	3.17	3.33

In general, four out of ten participants chose social strategies as the most frequently used language learning strategy in developing speaking skills. The average scores for social strategies were between 2.83 and 3.83, which indicated high frequency use of social strategies in their language learning activities or tasks. The four participants used social strategies to practise the language more frequently. In other words, they chose to engage in communicative activities such as asking questions and obtaining answers from their friends during pair work or group discussion in order to develop their speaking skills.

Memory strategies and affective strategies had the same number of participants (three participants for each strategy) who considered them as the least frequently used language learning strategies in developing speaking skills. The average scores for memory strategies were between 2.67 and 3.11, which indicated a lower frequency of use. The average scores for affective strategies, on the other hand, were between 2.33 and 2.83. Affective strategies were the least frequently employed strategies because the participants were not able to control their anxiety level and emotions during their presentation or communication with their friends in English. This finding was consistent with Al-Buainan (2010).

Language Learning Strategies Most Frequently Used by Proficient Learners

Based on the results of EPT scores, participants 2, 4, 5, 6 and 9 were classified as proficient learners. The frequency of their use of the language learning strategies is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of the Use of Language Learning Strategies by Proficient Participants

Participant	Part A Memory	Part B Cognitive	Part C Compensatory	Part D Metacognitive	Part E Affective	Part F Social
2	2.67	2.86	2.5	3.44	3.17	3.5
4	2.44	2.64	2.67	2.89	2.67	2
5	2.67	3.07	3	2.89	2.33	2.83
6	3.44	3.57	3.33	3.22	2.83	3.67
9	3.11	3.57	4	4.67	3.5	3.33

From the five participants, participants 2 and 6 chose social strategies with average scores of 3.5 and 3.67 respectively as their most frequently used language learning strategy whereas participants 4 and 9 opted for metacognitive strategies with average scores of 2.89 and 4.67 respectively as their most frequently adopted language learning strategy. Participant 5 selected cognitive strategies with an average score of 3.07 as the most frequently employed language learning strategy.

Participants 5 and 6, on the other hand, indicated affective strategies as the least frequently used language learning strategies. As for participant 2, compensatory strategies had the lowest average score of 2.5. Participant 9 indicated memory strategies as the least used strategies with an average score of 3.11 whereas participant 4 was the only learner who scored the lowest for social strategies with an average score of 2.

From the interview sessions with these proficient learners, it was discovered that both participants who used metacognitive strategies agreed that the strategies did help them to improve their pronunciation, usage of words in contexts and also confidence level in speaking English. Participants who opted for social strategies found that practising English with other students played a vital role in improving their speaking skills.

The IVEP learning environment may have contributed in several ways to the preferred use and selection of both metacognitive and social strategies. In terms of metacognitive strategies, participants enrolled in IVEP usually have strong instrumental motivation for learning English. Their purpose of learning English is to advance their academic career and thus the threat of failing the programme is a huge motivator for taking control of their learning.

The IVEP learning environment may also play a vital role in encouraging the high use of social strategies by participants. In a smaller class setting (only 10 students in this case), participants showed a strong preference for learning with others by asking questions and cooperating with peers. The findings are in line with those of Phillips's (1991) study of Asian ESL students enrolled in college IEPs who used social strategies more than affective and memory strategies. Gani, Fajrina and Hanifa (2015) further reveal that students who achieve high performance in speaking tasks showed an average of 4.10 for social strategies.

Language Learning Strategies Most Frequently Used by Less Proficient Learners

Participants 1, 3, 7, 8 and 10 were regarded as less proficient learners according to the results of their EPT scores. The frequency of their use of the language learning strategies is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of the Use of Language Learning Strategies by Less Proficient Learners

Participant	Part A Memory	Part B Cognitive	Part C Compensatory	Part D Metacognitive	Part E Affective	Part F Social
1	2.67	3.5	3.33	3.33	2.67	3.83
3	2.78	2.14	2.33	2.67	2.33	2.83
7	3.22	3.14	3.17	2.89	3	3.17
8	2.44	2.21	3	2.56	2.33	2.5
10	2.67	3.29	4.17	3.56	3.17	3.33

Out of the five less proficient learners, participants 1 and 3 preferred to use social strategies with average scores of 3.83 and 2.83 respectively whereas participants 8 and 10 were in favour of compensatory strategies with average scores of 3 and 4.17 respectively. Participant 7 was the only less proficient learner who employed memory strategies with an average score of 3.22.

Both participants 3 and 8 named cognitive strategies as ones that are used the least frequently while participant 1 and 10 gave the same average score of 2.67 for memory strategies, making such strategies the least frequently used ones for these participants. Participant 1 also scored an average of 2.67 for affective strategies. Participant 7 provided

an average score of 2.89 for metacognitive strategies as the least frequently used language learning strategy.

From the interview sessions with these less proficient learners, participants 1 and 3 disclosed that the reasons they preferred social strategies are because, firstly, they were comfortable with this strategy, and secondly, they found that by speaking to other people in English, it helped them to improve their use of the language. This finding corresponds with that of Gani, Fajrina and Hanifa (2015) who state that students with low speaking performance had the tendency to ask their friends how to pronounce words accurately. On the other hand, participants 8 and 10 went for compensatory strategies such as using a word or phrase that means the same thing if they cannot think of a word, and making up new words if they do not know the right ones in English in order to get the message across. This result is in line with Gani, Fajrina and Hanifa's study (2015) stating that learners with low performance in speaking chose compensatory strategies as the most frequently used ones. Participant 7 favoured memory strategies because memorising new words and sentences gave this participant the confidence to complete the speaking tasks.

Factors that Influence the Choice of Language Learning Strategies by Proficient and Less Proficient Learners in the Development of Speaking Skills

Based on the interview sessions with all the participants, it was revealed that their choices of language learning strategies were influenced by the type of speaking task. The participants shared that they used a mixture of strategies particularly as it pertained to preparing for a pre-assigned speaking task. A number of them reported the use of strategies that are task-specific:

Cognitive Strategies [*repetition*]
Participant 9   : . . . if I have time I will practice . . . keep saying the word make me
                       confident

Memory Strategies [*memorisation*]
Interviewer   : What do you do to prepare for class presentation that is in English?
Participant 8   : Mm… remember what I going to say.

Cognitive Strategies [*reading from script*]
Interviewer   : . . . what about for class presentation in English? How do you prepare for
                       that?
Participant 7   : I ready to sign in a paper and I read, I read more that like that

These strategies did not help participants to develop natural speaking skills. Instead, the strategies focused on correctness in the use of language, which was the main focus for students as they prepared for the pre-assigned speaking task since they had time to prepare a script and, oftentimes, committed it to memory for the in-class presentation.

On the other hand, the Mid-Term test and final exam that required students to speak impromptu did not give students the luxury of time to prepare a full script. So, for impromptu speaking tasks, students often relied on and drew from previous experience and learning, which were mostly gained from social strategies. Most students reported that

interacting with other English speakers and getting correction from them were helpful to refining their speaking skills. For example:

[*for practice*]

Participant 1: Most of them is lecturer or friend. Because if you don't ask question by English la then normally we don't speak in English . . . Yeah so if I start from English, they will . . . help me have more chance to speak English with them la.

Participant 2: I usually practice . . . English with my friends same course one . . . I want them speak in English then I reply them also use English, then so I can improve my English.

Participant 3: . . . because my English is not good so everyone speaking English I pay more attention to listening and I don't know I ask again.

Participant 9: if we are talking gossip or anything we will use to talk in English, not in our own language . . . By talking to them all the time and . . . Learning new words in English.

Participant 10: Because sometime chatting with uh having dialogue with friends and if that my friend is Indian right or Malay then they can't don't know how to speak Chinese then I will use my own words. If sometimes I talk some words then I suddenly don't know then I will use uh some simple words to cover it.

[*for teaching and correction*]

Participant 4: Because my hostel got one Indian boy . . . And the Indian boy will always talk to me . . . I talking . . . then he will correct me.

Participant 5: I will sometimes speak with other peoples to improve . . . Cause sometime I will have mistake my friend can . . . help me to correction my mistake.

Participant 6: when I speak another people or my friend will . . . correct me.

Participant 7: . . . when I talk with another people with English I can learn with him more the English word . . . sometime my friend he help me to correct . . . my word.

Participant 8: when I talk to my Indian friends and then sometime the word I don't understand then I . . . tell him to repeat and explain it to me . . . I can easy to remember the word he explain to me.

Nevertheless, students' perception of speaking skills was often defined by having strong vocabulary and correct pronunciation.

Interviewer	: How does that [reading] help you improve your speaking?
Participant 9	: Because I'm reading not by quiet. I am reading aloud by speaking, by pronouncing properly in loud.
Participant 6	: the English people if they say is very good I can learn from learn la like this.
Interviewer	: Learn what?

Participant 6	: Learn the English . . . The English speaking.
Interviewer	: When you say speaking what do you mean?
Participant 6	: Very clear and louder . . . pronunciation
Participant 2	: if I speak English with friend can help me . . . think that word is correct or not . . . if friends I, I did not know how to say the word then I, I want them speak one time then I follow they, they speak

In this study, the nature of the task played a vital role in determining the strategies employed to carry out the task for proficient and less proficient learners enrolled in IVEP at the Pre-Intermediate level.

Another factor that influences the choice of language learning strategies used by proficient and less proficient learners in this study would be instrumental motivation. The reason for this group of learners to take up IVEP was because their English proficiency level did not meet the English entry requirement of the institution. It was of utmost important for them to pass all the assessments, and speaking task was one of them. Therefore, they applied all kinds of language learning strategies that they believed could help them go through all assessments and moved on to their respective academic programmes.

Pedagogical Implications on the Development of Speaking Skills in IVEP

Understanding the language learning strategies of both proficient and less proficient learners will enable language instructors and curriculum designers to tailor the pedagogical approaches to the preferred strategies of the learners when designing activities that target students' speaking skills. All learners are equipped with different levels of aptitude. Therefore, a learning strategy may work for one learner, but not necessarily so for the other. As such, language learning tasks have to be tailored to match the students' language learning ability and preferred strategies.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to identify language learning strategies employed by both proficient and less proficient EFL learners in preparing for their speaking tasks within a twelve-week Intensive English Programme. It could be concluded that the most frequently used language learning strategies in speaking among the proficient learners were social and metacognitive strategies. On the other hand, less proficient learners chose social and compensatory strategies as their most frequently used language learning strategies in speaking. However, the learners' choice of language learning strategies also depended on the nature of the speaking tasks and the learners' motivation. In general, social strategies were the most frequently used language learning strategies for both proficient and less proficient learners whereas memory and affective strategies were the least frequently used language learning strategies in this study.

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