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INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF USING LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES TO
IMPROVE THE PERFORMANCE OF NON-MAJOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

OSAMA YOUSIF IBRAHIM ABUALZAIN

Assistant professor in applied linguistics at Al Baha University
Faculty of Sciences and Arts – English department
osamaabualzain2011@hotmail.com



OSAMA YOUSIF
IBRAHIM ABUALZAIN

ABSTRACT

This study tried to investigate the impact of language learning strategies in improving the performance of non-major English language university students' speaking skills. Two tools were employed in this study; a questionnaire and a speaking test. One hundred students were chosen randomly as a sample and they were divided into control and experimental groups. The choice of the sample was followed by an analysis of the pre-test and post-test results of the students' performance. The results showed that applying language learning strategies can improve the performance of the students in speaking skills. The results also revealed that language strategies are teachable.

Keywords: language learning, strategies, speaking kills.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies concerning language learning strategies date back to the 1970s. Brown (2000) thinks that learning a language is not a simple phenomenon. It is as complex as the language itself. Anderson (1990) believes that learning a language doesn't only mean mastering linguistic knowledge, but it involves learning many other skills and strategies which can help learners in performing this great task.

Language learning strategies (LLS) are seen as a shift from focusing on teachers and teaching to learners and learning. Cohen (1998) defined such a shift when he states that "one potentially beneficial shift in teacher roles is from that of being exclusively the manager, controller and instructor to that of being a change agent – a facilitator of learning, whose role is to help their students to become more independent and more responsible for their own learning. In this role, the teachers become partners in the learning process" (p. 97). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1985), Language learning strategies are different from teaching strategies (the techniques used by teachers to help learners learn) in that, the learner and not the teacher is the one who exercises control over the operations of the designated activity.

O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo (1985) see that learning strategies are very strong instruments for learners to solve their problems with learning. Also, based on the information in

the literature, it has been proved that strategies can help learners a lot in solving their problems. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found that teachers may need to be convinced that strategy training is important, and they may themselves need to be trained in how to teach strategies.

According to Brown (2000), strategies can be taught to learners. A lot of research has been developed to see if strategy-use can be effective in language learning or not. However, they are mainly in relation with receptive skills, i.e., reading and listening. Due to the difficulty of measuring the productive skills, specially speaking, few researchers are encouraged to develop projects in this respect. But we know that speaking is an important skill and mastering this skill is very vital for learners to communicate, therefore, this study also investigates whether teaching learning-strategies in general could help non-major English language university students use those strategies effectively and if strategy-instruction could improve learners' speaking ability.

For Dornyei and Otto (1998), all language learning strategies are related to the features of control, goal directedness, autonomy and self-efficacy. Goals are the engine that fires language learning action and provides the direction for the action; examples of goals are to use English fluently and accurately in business, to order meals, to ask directions, etc.

Allwright (1990); Wenden (1991); Cotterall (1995) see that learning strategies help learners become more autonomous. Autonomy requires conscious control of one's own learning processes. Bandura (1997) thinks that learning strategies also enhance self- efficacy, individuals' perception that they can successfully complete a task or series of tasks.

Oxford (1990) maintains that learning strategies are teachable. Of course, teaching strategies should not be viewed as the only way for solving learners' difficulties, but as Griffiths (2006) proposes, it can be a good instrument if it can lead to learner's autonomy. If teachers can help learners learn by themselves, then they have taught learners how to fish rather than to provide them with a fish. Also, it was reported that positive effects of strategy-instruction emerged for proficiency in listening (Johnson 1999), speaking (Dadour and Robbins 1996; Varela 1999), reading (Park-Oh 1994) and writing (Sano 1999). In various language learning investigations, strategy instruction led to greater strategy use and self-efficacy (Chamot et al. 1996), anxiety reduction (Johnson 1999), and to increased motivation, strategy knowledge and positive attitudes (Nunan 1997).

Objectives of the Study

This study attempts to investigate the impact of language learning strategies on the performance of non-major English language university students' speaking skills. The research is of great benefits and advantages due to the fact that it:

- a) explores the impact of language learning strategies on the performance of non-major English language university students' speaking skills.
- b) sheds light on the ability to teach language learning strategies.
- c) suggests different types of language strategies that the students can use.
- d) encourages the students to transfer language strategies in different tasks.
- e) helps the students to be autonomous learners.
- f) describes and values the importance of language learning strategies.

Materials and methods

Subjects

The participants of this study were selected from 100 male and female students of Sudan University of Science and Technology and Ahfad University for Women who had taken their requisite course at BA level in non-English language departments including business studies, psychology and accounting. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 21. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups- the experimental and the control group- each consisting of 50 participants. This study was conducted in 2015.

Instruments

In order to collect the data, the following instruments were employed in this study:

Pre-and post- SILL questionnaire

It was proposed by Oxford (1990) called Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which has been devised for measuring the strategy use of students of English as a second or foreign language. Based on their real situations of English learning, participants are required to choose the answer. Participants are also told that the survey is not a test so they do not need to worry about the result affecting their academic performance.

Before the training program took place, both the control and the experimental groups had to complete this questionnaire. Their performances were registered to compare it with their achievements in the post-test in order to measure their use of language strategies.

There are fifty questions being categorized into six main strategies. Memory Strategies contain nine questions, Cognitive Strategies contain fourteen questions, Compensatory Strategies contain six questions, Meta-cognitive Strategies contain nine questions, Affective Strategies include five questions and Social Strategies include seven questions. This questionnaire takes about 20-25 minutes to complete.

Pre- and post- speaking tests

Pre-and post-speaking tests are the same tests. The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the semester before the training program. It is, therefore, used as a diagnostic test to measure the performance of the students in speaking English. The post-test was conducted after the students in the experimental group had been taught the language strategies and had gone under a training program. It was used to examine the efficiency of the students in speaking English to find out whether the students made any progress in their speaking performance or not.

The pre-and post-speaking tests were tape recorded in order to obtain reliable data. By the help of the tape recordings, the raters evaluated the performances of the participants in the pre-and post-speaking tests through a speaking scale produced by Chaney and Burke (1998) as an analytic scoring evaluation for oral productions.

Discussion

Language Learning Strategies as proposed by Oxford (1990) are defined as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information, specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (p. 3).

Oxford (1990) considered the strategies to fall into two main types, in terms of their relationship to the language data and the learner: direct strategies concerned mainly with processing the data, and indirect strategies concerned mainly with the learner's response. Major varieties of language learning strategies are cognitive, mnemonic, meta-cognitive, compensatory (for speaking and writing), affective and social.

Cognitive strategies help learners make and strengthen associations between new and already-known information (O'malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1996) and facilitate the mental restructuring of information. Mnemonic strategies, on the other hand, help learners link a new item with something known, while meta-cognitive strategies help learners manage themselves, their learning process and learning tasks. Also, compensatory strategies are believed to help learners make up for missing knowledge when using English in oral or written communication, whereas affective strategies include identifying one's feelings (e.g. anxiety, anger and contentment) and becoming aware of the learning circumstance or tasks that evoke them. And after all, according Oxford (1990) social strategies facilitate learning with others and help learners understand the culture of the language they are learning.

Oxford (1990) suggests that, to improve language learning proficiency, strategy instruction should be explicitly taught and that strategy instruction should be integrated only as part of the regular language class. Positive results about strategy instruction are pleasing. Some factors which have been reported to influence strategy use are mentioned below:

1. Motivation has an important influence on strategy use (Chamot et al. 1996), with greater motivation related to higher frequencies of strategy use. As Dornyei and Otto (1998) explained, learning strategies as goal-directed behaviors inherently indicate the presence of motivation.
2. The language learning environment affected strategy use, with students in ESL environments using strategies more frequently than those in EFL environments (Oxford 1990).
3. Learning style and personality type influenced strategy use (Reid 1995).
4. Gender has frequently been associated with strategy use; with some variation across studies, females usually report greater strategy use than males (Oxford et al. 1993).
5. Culture had a strong effect on how students learn, according to general research and language learning strategy research (Bedell and Oxford 1996).
6. Age affected the kinds of strategies students reported (Gunning 1997), but even young children were able to identify and describe their language learning strategies (Chamot 1999).
7. The nature of the language task has an influence on strategy choice in many studies (O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

Data analysis

Having collected the required data based on the above methodology, the researcher conducted the analysis of data for the present study.

SILL pre-test questionnaire

The SILL pre-test questionnaire was conducted to the both experimental group and the control one to check the frequency usage of the SILL by the participants.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of the students' pre-test results of SILL use.

Strategy use	Excellent		V. good		Fair		Poor		upper		Lower	
	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont	Exp
Memory	21.0	19.0	22.0	23.0	25.0	27.0	17.0	15.0	43.0	42.0	42.0	42.0
Cognitive	19.0	18.0	20.0	22.0	23.0	27.0	22.0	19.0	39.0	40.0	45.0	46.0
Compensation	25.0	24.0	23.0	22.0	21.0	23.0	20.0	22.0	48.0	46.0	41.0	45.0
Meta-cognitive	18.0	19.0	20.0	20.0	28.0	21.0	25.0	28.0	38.0	39.0	53.0	49.0
Affective	23.0	23.0	22.0	24.0	20.0	24.0	26.0	24.0	45.0	47.0	46.0	48.0
Social	24.0	25.0	23.0	19.0	22.0	24.0	26.0	23.0	47.0	44.0	48.0	47.0

Table (1) shows the results of the SIL pre-test survey for the experimental and control groups. The score of students in both the experimental and the control is similar to some extent. Obviously, the participants also didn't get high grades in these strategies which mean that they were unfamiliar with strategy-use before the treatment.

In this questionnaire, the highest percentage for the control group of upper students (excellent and good) is 48.0 in compensation strategy; the lowest percentage is 38.0 in meta-cognitive strategy. The highest percentage for the control group of lower students (fair and poor) is 41.0 in compensation strategy; the lowest percentage is 53.0 in meta-cognitive strategy. On the other hand, the highest percentage for the experimental group of upper students is 47.0 in affective strategy; the lowest percentage is 39.0 in meta-cognitive strategy. The highest percentage for the experimental group of lower students is 42.0 in memory strategy; the lowest percentage is 49.0 in meta-cognitive strategy.

SILL post-test questionnaire

As shown in table (2) there is a significant difference between students' usage of SILL in pre-test and post-tests, concerning strategy use. In regard to the experimental group, there is a general development in the students' usage of SILL in post-test, compared to pre-test results. On the other hand, the participants of the control group showed no progress in their usage of SILL because they didn't receive any kind of training in strategy use.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the students' post-test results of SILL use.

Strategy use	Excellent		V. good		Fair		Poor		Upper		Lower	
	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp.
Memory	22.0	31.0	21.0	33.0	26.0	19.0	16.0	9.0	43.0	64.0	42.0	28.0
Cognitive	19.0	31.0	21.0	35.0	24.0	13.0	24.0	11.0	40.0	66.0	48.0	24.0
Compensation	26.0	35.0	23.0	33.0	21.0	10.0	22.0	10.0	49.0	68.0	43.0	20.0
Meta-cognitive	17.0	28.0	21.0	30.0	29.0	8.0	24.0	13.0	38.0	58.0	53.0	21.0
Affective	24.0	39.0	22.0	35.0	21.0	7.0	25.0	14.0	46.0	74.0	46.0	21.0
Social	22.0	34.0	23.0	35.0	23.0	11.0	26.0	8.0	45.0	69.0	49.0	19.0

In memory strategy, the strategy students' usage is developed. Students' achievement is higher in the post-test compared to their performance in the pre-test. In the pre-test the percentage of upper performance was (42.0) while in the post-test it was (64.0). And lower marks were decreased in the post-test by 28.0 in comparison to the pre-test which was 42.0. This difference reflects the improvement in the students' usage of SILL.

As shown in table (2) above, the students' usage of cognitive strategy is better in the post test, and their score was 66.0 while in the pre-test it was 40.0. They made and strengthened associations between new and already-known information. The students' achievement was also enhanced in the compensation strategy. In the post-test it was 68.0, compared to the pre-test which was 46.0. the lower marks were dropped in the post-test by 20.0% in comparison to the pre-test which was 45.0%.

Regarding meta-cognitive, as shown in table (2) above, it is clear that the students made good progress as indicated by the post-test 58.0 which is higher than the pre-test 39.0. The students scored good results in the post-test in managing themselves, their learning process and learning tasks. Also, the lower usage was decreased in the post-test by 21.0% compared to 49.0 in the pre-test. In the affective strategy there is a remarkable increase in the strategy use in the post-test 74.0 compared to the pre-test which was only 47.0. The students made a control over their feelings (e.g. anxiety, anger and contentment) and becoming aware of the learning circumstance or tasks that evoke them.

Concerning the social strategy, the students made a considerable progress in the post-test 69.0 whereas it is just 44.0 in the pre-test. The lower usage of social strategy went down in the post-test by 19.0 in comparison of 47.0 in the pre-test. Generally, the usage of the SILL after the training of the experimental group went up while the usage of the SILL for the control group was still in the same spot or around it up or down.

Pre-speaking test

It was administered to the experimental and the control groups before the participants of the experimental group went over the training program. The researcher documented the performance of the participants to compare it with their performance in the post-test to see if there is a significant progress or not.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the students' pre-speaking test.

Speaking skills	Excellent		V. good		Fair		Poor		Upper		Lower	
	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp.
Fluency	18.0	17.0	19.0	18.0	29.0	33.0	29.0	28.0	37.0	35.0	58.0	61.0
Accuracy	19.0	23.0	21.0	22.0	32.0	36.0	38.0	35.0	40.0	45.0	70.0	71.0
Vocabulary	18.0	17.0	16.0	18.0	29.0	32.0	31.0	35.0	34.0	35.0	65.0	70.0
Complexity	18.0	13.0	17.0	21.0	29.0	33.0	33.0	34.0	35.0	34.0	62.0	67.0
Pronunciation	13.0	15.0	14.0	18.0	33.0	38.0	39.0	34.0	27.0	33.0	72.0	72.0

Table (3) shows the performance of the experimental and the control groups in the pre-speaking test. There is no a considerable difference between the score of students in the two groups. The participants didn't

get high percentage in speaking skills which mean that they weren't trained to use speaking strategies before the training programme.

In this test, the highest percentage for the control group of upper students (excellent and good) is 40.0 in accuracy; the lowest percentage is 27.0 in pronunciation. The highest percentage for the control group of lower students (fair and poor) is 58.0 in fluency; the lowest percentage is 72.0 in pronunciation. On the other hand, the highest percentage for the experimental group of upper students is 45.0 in accuracy; the lowest percentage is 33.0 in pronunciation. The highest percentage for the experimental group of lower students is 61.0 in fluency; the lowest in the both groups shared the weakness in pronunciation which is a crucial element in speaking skills.

Post-speaking test

After the experimental group had gone over a training programme of using language strategies, the same pre-speaking test was administered to the both groups again.

Table 4: Frequency distribution of the students' post-speaking test.

Speaking skills	Excellent		V. good		Fair		Poor		Upper		Lower	
	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont.	Exp	Cont	Exp.
Fluency	16.0	31.0	20.0	36.0	33.0	24.0	30.0	17.0	36.0	67.0	63.0	41.0
Accuracy	18.0	32.0	22.0	33.0	35.0	19.0	36.0	23.0	40.0	65.0	71.0	42.0
Vocabulary	20.0	29.0	19.0	32.0	27.0	21.0	33.0	26.0	39.0	61.0	60.0	47.0
Complexity	19.0	24.0	19.0	29.0	31.0	22.0	31.0	23.0	38.0	53.0	62.0	45.0
Pronunciation	14.0	24.0	16.0	27.0	31.0	27.0	38.0	23.0	30.0	51.0	69.0	50.0

As shown in table (4) there is significant difference in the score of the students' pre-test and post-test. The students' performance was enhanced in the post-test.

Regarding speaking fluency, as shown in table (4), there is apparent development in the students' performance in adopting the language strategies in speaking. The post-test score in percentage was 67.0 which was higher than the pre-test score percentage 35.0. The lower score in the pre-test was 61.0 compared to 41.0 in the post-test. This result showed a progress in the ability of the students to talk at length with few pauses and to be able to fill the time with talking without hesitations and pass their messages in a coherent, reasoned and semantically-expressed manner.

As for the speaking accuracy, the students produced the target language according to its rule system. In the post-test the performance of the students was 65.0, compared to the pre-test score (45.0). The lower score in the pre-test was 71.0 compared to 42.0 in the post-test. This result shows that there is a progress in the students' performance.

The test score showed that the students made good vocabulary usage in speaking and used coherent and appropriate style in their post-test. The post-test score was (61.0) in the use of vocabulary which is higher than the pre-test score (45.0). The lower score in the post-test was 47.0 compared to 70.0 in the pre-test. Coherence in the students' using of vocabulary improved as a result of the training sessions.

As shown in table (4), the test score reveals that there is a good progress in the students' usage of complexity in the speech organization. The pre-test score in the students' achievement was (34) while in the post-test it was (53.0). The lower score in the post-test was 45.0 compared to 67.0 in the pre-test. This result shows that the students have achieved better and the amount of subordination has been commonly used, as it reflects the degree of structuring of speech.

Table (4) shows that, the students' pronunciation was improved in the post-test compared to the pre-test. The pre-test score was 33.0 while in the post-test the percentage went up to 51.0. In the lower post-test score it was 50.0 whereas in the pre-test was 72.0. The development is in the terms of producing the sounds of speech, including articulation, stress and intonation. This progress is the result of language strategies courses that were taught before the post-test.

Generally, the speaking test revealed that positive teaching of language strategies contributed to the development of the students' speaking skills. Therefore, the hypotheses that were set to answer the main research questions have been validated and confirmed.

Results

The obtained results showed that language learning strategies can help learners improve their speaking performance. This finding matches with what was reported by Dadour and Robins (1996) and Varela (1999) that positive effects of learning strategy emerged for proficiency in speaking.

Brown (2000), Oxford (1990) and Chamot et. al (1996) emphasized that language learning strategies can be taught. The findings of this study also support the idea of teaching language strategies to non-major English language university students'. Language learning strategies can be taught explicitly for EFL learners, especially if they are incorporated into a regular classroom teaching.

The outcome of this study can be beneficial for syllabus designers who can include sufficient practices in the scope of language learning strategies in EFL syllabuses in order to encourage learners develop their competence in strategy use while learning a specific skill in target language. This is what O'Mally and Chamot (1990) stressed. They suggested that exercises should be designed in such a way that they elicit and induce learners in the use of the taught strategies.

The findings of this study may have some suggestions for English teachers and educators. ESL instructors can be encouraged to employ strategy instructions in their language teaching classes. Griffiths (2006) debates that we cannot find any systematic employing of those strategies in the syllabus or in our education. This is something which has worried many researchers in the field of teaching.

The researcher has done the study to examine the impact of language learning strategies in improving the performance of non-major English language university students' speaking skills. However; one can do the same with other skills. Furthermore, it is possible to draw some strategies out of SILL and study their incorporation with specific skills because some of the items of SILL are directly or indirectly related to a specific skill.

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