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Preferred Language Learning Strategies for Speaking Skills among Female Secondary Students

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Abstract

Speaking skills play a vital role in communication as it is a tool for acquiring English language elements, including other language skills. However, language learning strategies are crucial for students' speaking skills, especially the young ones. Gender has proven to have a significant influence on the language learning approaches utilized. Female students use more strategies than male students; they also use different strategies and have distinct language learning preferences. Hence, this study aims to identify Language Learning Strategies employed by female students of a convent school in Selangor to improve their speaking skills and to identify their preferred language strategies for speaking skills. This study used a questionnaire, and data were analysed using frequency and percentages. The findings showed that female students preferred cognitive and social strategies to enhance their speaking skills. This study implies that further research on the preferred learning strategies should also include the teacher's perception of the efficient learning strategies that significantly impact the student's learning.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Preferred Language Learning Strategies Gender, English as a Second Language (ESL), Speaking Skills

Introduction

A common understanding of learning strategy is its importance in enhancing a particular language teaching and learning process while building students' motivation to become independent language learners (Jones, 1998). A learning strategy is also an approach to learning and using information. Bruen (2001) claims that a learning strategy is repeatedly used to understand specific details or theory and solve problems. Hence, a student who fails to master the necessary learning strategies may either learn passively or fail to acquire the focused knowledge.

In contrast, the one with the learning strategy can focus and engage in a learning process efficiently. It is further supported by Shi (2017) that the strategy will help the learners improve learning aspects such as skills, confidence, and motivation. On the other hand, O'Malley &

Chamot (1990) concentrated on picking new knowledge components, analysing and monitoring information during the encoding process, and evaluating the learning. Thus, learning techniques are critical in helping students to overcome their fear.

Learning strategies are essential for the success of a lesson. ESL, which mainly focuses on enhancing reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills, also requires the inclusion of various learning strategies that complement language acquisition while being aligned to the recently emerged CEFR syllabus in the Malaysian English Language curriculum. One of the prominent skills needed to be learned by learners is speaking, and it has become a part of the new CEFR syllabus whereby students have to score in it to get good grades on English 111/9 paper. Since people use it to communicate in various circumstances, it is essential in general (John et al., 2021).

Speaking skill is one of the most important communicative skills. Among all the four skills, speaking is regarded as the essence of the four critical language skills in learning a foreign language or second language (Rao, 2019). It is undeniable that speaking is a valuable ability in general as it is being used widely to communicate for various roles and purposes. Though awareness of the importance of speaking skills exist among our community in Malaysia, an effective effort to ensure the mastery of speaking skill was not implemented in schools. The teaching of this particular skill appeared in the syllabus. Still, since it was not carrying any weightage in the public examination under the previous English Language Curriculum, practical teaching of speaking did not seem to take place in the classroom.

Communication skills, which regard speaking as one of its core skills, is critical to success in all fields. Language is used as a communication tool by everyone. Excellent communication skills are impossible for people without language use (Rao, 2018). Many Malaysian Students who scored A in their English examination could not prove themselves good English Language speakers. The whole education focuses on mastering reading and writing skills, which were being assessed in the examination. Recently, our Malaysian English Language Curriculum has adopted CEFR, and speaking abilities have been given equal weightage as reading, writing, and listening skills, which will also be assessed in the public examination. Hence, the seriousness of learning Speaking skills has increased, and various learning strategies have been considered when executing a Speaking lesson. This has also exposed our students to different language learning strategies and allowed them to develop particular preferences when learning to speak.

Nevertheless, the adaptation of the CEFR curriculum has now begun to give equal priority to speaking skills which focuses on communicating while utilizing the appropriate registers and colloquialism. This is upon the realization that acquiring the speaking ability has become one of the significant challenges among learners in Malaysia due to a lack of exposure to the English Language in their daily life (Ahmed, 2018). This challenge should never be taken for granted and treated more seriously since it is a two-way path involving both instructors and students (Nor et al., 2019). Here, the educators should make an effort to ensure that their teaching plans are successful in securing a more appropriate student learning environment by using a diversified and mixed-method approach that appeals to most students' learning styles and preferences. Concerning this, there is a need to consider students' preferred

language learning strategies in ensuring an effective language learning process. Thus, this study aims to identify the preferred language strategies for speaking skills.

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Pedagogies are how students construct meaning from their learning (Wenden, 1987). Learning strategy may be seen as learning skills, learning-to-learn skills, thinking skills, problem-solving talents, or the techniques in which learners acquire, store, and retrieve knowledge throughout the learning process (Chien, 2010). Language Learning Strategies from the perspective of language learning behaviors, such as learning and regulating the meaning of a second or foreign language, cognitive theory, such as learners' strategic knowledge of language learning; and the affective view, such as learners' motivation, attitude, etc., are nonetheless pertinent to the study of language learning strategies (Wenden, 1987). According to Pzeman (2012), one of the best and most often cited definitions in the literature is provided by (Oxford, 1990). She defines language learning practices as "specific actions performed by the learner to make language acquisition easier, faster, more pleasurable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable." It represents the learner's aspirations and the activities he can pursue. In addition, she emphasises the significance of context in language acquisition.

Oxford classified language acquisition processes into two basic categories: direct and indirect. According to Firima (2018), direct strategies include mental processes and directly influence the target language, while indirect strategies support and manage language without directly impacting the target language (Oxford, 1990). In addition, direct methods consist of memory, cognition, and compensation, while indirect strategies include metacognitive, emotional, and social strategies. According to Oxford (1990), cited by Aridah (2021), memory methods comprise the mental processes of storing new information in the memory and retrieving it as needed. These techniques pertain to the following four categories:-

- A. Creating mental connections
- B. Utilizing visuals and sounds
- C. Conducting a thorough review, and
- D. Taking action

Cognitive methods consist of four distinct groups

- A. Practicing
- B. Receiving and sending signals
- C. Analysing and reasoning, and
- D. Creating input and output structures.

Despite knowledge gaps, compensation mechanisms allow learners to utilise the language orally or in writing. These techniques are separated into two categories

- A. intelligent guessing and
- B. overcoming restrictions in speaking and writing

According to Oxford's (1990) definition, indirect strategies encompass metacognitive, emotional, and social strategies. Indirect methods offer indirect help for language acquisition by applying skills such as concentration, organisation, evaluation, opportunity seeking, and

anxiety reduction. Metacognitive methods allow students to have control over their cognition. These are techniques that include:

- A. Summarizing and connecting previously learned content
- B. Paying attention
- C. Delaying voice output
- D. Organising
- E. Setting objectives and aims
- F. Planning for a linguistic assignment
- G. Seeking out chances for practise
- H. Self-monitoring and self-evaluation

Affective techniques help students control their

- A. emotions,
- B. motivation, and
- C. learning-related attitudes.

They may be attained through reducing worry, motivating oneself, and measuring one's emotional temperature. Social strategies improve language acquisition via social interactions. Language is a kind of social activity, and learning it includes other people; thus, language learners must adopt proper social methods (1990). These techniques are grouped into three categories

- A. asking inquiries
- B. collaborating, and
- C. demonstrating empathy for others.

Good Language Learner (GLL)

Ability, desire, and opportunity are considered to impact effective language learning at least thrice. It is assumed that aptitude is the least sensitive to manipulation of the three; the amount to which it is subject to modification has been thoroughly investigated in the literature. Some scholars feel that language ability is "a usually constant property of the individual that cannot be easily changed via schooling" (Carroll, 1960). Hence, Politzer & Weiss (1969) have shown that linguistic ability may be slightly improved with training, while others have highlighted the tenuous relationship between aptitude and motivation.

Figure 1 indicates that, according to Sandee (2005); Lightbown and Spada's (1997) list resembles that of Rubin and Thompson. However, Lightbown and Spada thought students must also possess a high IQ, excellent academic skills, and a passion for learning. They meant that if students had good skills and could study other subjects, they could subsequently use

those capabilities (e.g., pattern identification) for language acquisition.

Rubin and Thompson's Characteristics of a Good Learner {1983}

1. Good learners find their own way
2. Good learners organize information about language
3. Good learners are creative and experiment with language
4. Good learners make their own opportunities, and find strategies for getting practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom
5. Good learners learn to live with uncertainty and develop strategies for making sense of the target language without wanting to understand every word
6. Good learners use mnemonics (rhymes, word associations, etc. to recall what has been learned)
7. Good learners make errors work
8. Good learners use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language in mastering a second language
9. Good learners let the context (extra-linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world) help them in comprehension
10. Good learners learn to make intelligent guesses
11. Good learners learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform 'beyond their competence'
12. Good learners learn production techniques (e.g. techniques for keeping a conversation going)
13. Good learners learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation

(Figure 1) Nunan, David (2000) Language Teaching Methodology, Harlow, Pearson Education Ltd. Page 171

Sandee (2005) performed a study titled "The Effective Language Learner." The research indicated the following factors determine the qualities of an effective language learner: - A. Enthusiasm B. Self-assurance and a readiness to make errors and take risks C. Knowledge of their learning patterns D. Implementing effective learning methodologies

In one research, Nunan (2005) analysed the practises of 44 non-native English-speaking EFL instructors from various Asian nations. He discovered that being driven and willing to take chances, having opportunities to use the language outside the classroom, and having some form-focused and learner-centered activities were the most significant elements in this group's learning. According to Nunan (2000), the lack of possibilities to speak or use the language was the leading reason participants believed they had difficulty learning a language (Sandee, 2005).

Speaking Skills

According to Maryam and Reza (2014), speaking is the process of generating and transmitting meaning via verbal and non-verbal symbols in various contexts (Chaney, 1998). They believed speaking is a crucial element of second language training and acquisition. One of the four productive skills must be acquired to learn a foreign language. According to them, good speaking skill is the capacity to develop words that the audience can grasp. According to Lai and Seyedeh (2017), speaking skills are one of the most challenging components of language learning and one of the most critical skills to develop and enhance for effective communication. They remarked that it is worthy of attention in native and foreign languages.

Speaking is the most vital aspect of second or foreign language acquisition, and success is evaluated by the ability to carry on a conversation in the target language (Nunan, 1995).

Many English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) students appreciate improving their English speaking skills. Sometimes, language students evaluate their accomplishment in language study based on how well their skill in the spoken language has progressed. Maryam and Reza (2014) asserted in their study titled "Technology in teaching speaking competence" that language learners frequently evaluate their language learning and the effectiveness of an English course based on their perception of the improvement in their spoken language proficiency. Indirect methods establish settings for spoken engagement via group work, task work, and other strategies (Lai and Seyedeh, 2017).

Preferred Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

According to Oxford & Nyikos (1989), language learning techniques aid in acquiring, processing, and retrieving information. Excellent language learners use a variety of techniques that are adapted to their competence levels. Numerous students employ strategies to acquire knowledge. According to Gu & Johnson (1996), regarding some language abilities, the kind of method selected by students and its effectiveness depends on the assignment (Schmitt, 2000).

Individuals are always distinct (Hasni, 2016). They use specific learning methods and strategies while studying a foreign language. Griffiths (2008) believes that several variables influence the outcome of a learner's second language acquisition. This includes learner variables such as aptitude, learning style, motivation, age, beliefs, culture, gender, personality, metacognition, and autonomy; and learning variables such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, function, skills, teaching or learning method, strategy instruction, error correction, or task. All of these aspects result in a unique pattern for each learner.

There is nonetheless research linking LLS preference to gender. Diverse perspectives on learning strategies have led to the conclusion that numerous individual variables, such as gender, age, motivation for language acquisition, cognitive learning style, maturity level, prior experience with language acquisition, and learner beliefs, influence the selection of learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), gender substantially impacts language-learning techniques; female students use different strategies than male students, and female students utilise more strategies than male students. Nyikos (2008) contends that the disparities between male and female language learning preferences are statistically significant in certain instances. Aslan (2009) discovered that female students are more likely to utilise Compensation Tactics, whereas male students are more likely to use Metacognitive Strategies. According to Cohen and Henry (2019), the most significant individual variations among learners are age and gender.

Methodology

Research Design

Quantitative research design has been chosen as it produces a wider range of findings while also demonstrating the significance and trustworthiness of the research.

Sampling Method

This study targets the Form 5 female students of a Convent school in Selangor (N=30). Purposive sampling was used in this study.

Instrument (Questionnaires)

The instrument used for this study is questionnaires as a medium for the study's findings. The questions are related to preferred language learning strategies in speaking skills. The questionnaire was adapted and developed by (Cohen et al., 2009). Section A and Section B. Section A referred to their demographic profile, while Section B covered a few questions related to preferred language learning strategies in speaking skills. In Section B, There are three categories of questions (A, B, and C) altogether. Part A focuses on "In order to practise speaking," part B "In order to engage in conversations," meanwhile part C "When I cannot think of a word or expression." Besides, the questionnaires are based on "I use this strategy and found it useful" (1), "I have tried this strategy but welcome learning more about it" (2) then followed by "I have never tried this strategy" (3).

Data Collection Procedure

There were 30 questionnaires distributed to the Form 5 female students of a Convent school in Selangor. The questionnaires were distributed in the classroom by one of the teachers in that school itself. Students will be given 10 minutes to answer the questionnaires. This survey is for students to get a better idea and a clear picture of the language learning strategy when answering the question so that a conclusion can be made based on the options chosen by participants. Besides, the questions indicate their perspective on their preferred language learning strategies in speaking skills.

Data Analysis Procedure

After collecting all of the data from the instrument, the data analysis procedures can be put into action. It is essential to carefully examine each of the facts to engage in in-depth discussion for the study. The collected data from the survey will be exported into Microsoft Excel to carry out a descriptive analysis method. Then, the data will be analysed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Each analysed question will be provided with a short description to state and compare the percentage among the answer options.

Findings

Table 1.1

In order to practice for speaking

	Frequency & Percentage (%)					
	I have never tried this strategy		I have tried this strategy and welcome learning more about it		I use this strategy and found it useful	
I may well say new expressions repeatedly to myself in order to practice them.	10	33.3	11	36.7	9	30.0
I am likely to practice new grammatical structures in different situations to check out my confidence level with the structures	4	13.3	20	66.7	6	20.0
I ask myself how a native speaker might say something and I attempt to practice saying it that way	4	13.3	9	30.0	17	56.7

Table 1.2

In order to engage in conversation

	Frequency & Percentage (%)					
	I have never tried this strategy		I have tried this strategy and welcome learning more about it		I use this strategy and found it useful	
I regularly seek out people with whom I can speak the new language	7	23.3	13	43.3	10	33.3
I initiate conversations in the new language as often as I can	2	6.7	18	60.0	10	33.3
I frequently direct the conversation to topics for which I know vocabulary	5	16.7	18	60.0	7	23.3
I tend to plan out in advance what I want to say	7	23.3	8	26.7	15	50.0
I frequently ask questions as a way to be sure I am involved in conversation	8	26.7	10	33.3	12	40.0
I anticipate what the other person is going to say based on what has been said so far	9	30.0	11	36.7	10	33.3
I usually avoid topics I don't have language for	22	73.3	5	16.7	3	10.0
I often look to others to correct my errors in speaking and welcome the feedback.	1	3.3	10	33.3	19	63.3
I frequently use expressions that call for both language and cultural knowledge, such as requesting, apologizing, or complaining in the target language	0	0.0	15	50.0	15	50.0

If I don't know how to perform culturally-based language expressions such as apologizing, I sometimes ask natives what they do.	5	16.7	14	46.7	11	36.7
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Table 1.3

*When I can't think of a word or expression***PART C**

	Frequency & Percentage (%)					
	I have never tried this strategy		I have tried this strategy and welcome learning more about it		I use this strategy and found it useful	
I often ask the person I'm talking with to help me out	1	3.3	4	13.3	25	83.3
I will look for a different way to express the idea; for example, I use a synonym or describe the idea or object I want to talk about	0	0.0	7	23.3	23	76.7
I use words from my native language, but I add vowels or consonants so that they seem like words in the target language	8	26.7	12	40.0	10	33.3
On occasion I may make up new words if I do not know the right ones	13	43.3	10	33.3	7	23.3
Whenever necessary I use gestures as a way of conveying my meaning	3	10.0	13	43.3	14	46.7
I am likely to switch back to my own language momentarily if I know my conversation partner can understand what I am saying	4	13.3	12	40.0	14	46.7

The findings from the study (**Part A**) shows that 17 pupils (**56.7%**) the highest number of pupils claimed that they asked themselves how a native speaker would say something, and they would attempt to practice saying it that way and the lowest number of pupils, **4 (13.3%)** said that they do not practice new grammatical structures in different situations to check out their confidence level with the structures. Besides that, for **Part B**, around **18 pupils (60%)** agreed that they frequently initiate conversation to topics in which they know the vocabulary.

Apart from that, only **2 pupils (6.7%)** would initiate conversations in new language frequently. In addition, for **Part C, 14 pupils (46.7%)** claimed that they use necessary gestures to convey their meaning and switch back to their own language if they know their partners can understand them. To contradict, around **3 pupils (10.0%)** used gestures to convey their meaning.

Table 1.4

Total Frequency (N) and Percentage (%)

Total	
Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
30	100.0

Table 1.4 shows that the total number of frequency (**N**) which is **30** which contributes to the percentage of **100%**

Table 1.5

The total mean of the respondents per category

	Frequency (N)	Mean (ΣX)
Part A	30	2.16
Part B	30	2.15
Part C	30	2.36
Valid N	30	-

Table 1.5 depicts the total mean of the respondents per category which **Part C** contributes the highest mean of **2.36** and **Part B** contributes the lowest of **2.15**.

Discussion

Based on the findings, it seems that students use a small number of speaking methods. Item 3 has the highest item frequency and percentage of students who had used the strategy and found it helpful

These data suggest that female students adopt cognitive and social techniques or language acquisition. Cognitive strategies are the learning or problem-solving techniques that entail direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of acquired information (Rubin, 1897). According to Rubin (1897), social tactics are behaviours that students participate in to find practice-enabling environments. Language acquisition always includes other people; it is a social behaviour. Thus these tactics are crucial. The students would seek assistance from their peers, which would boost their practical learning.

Based on the tactics suggested by Oxford (1990), the students favour Social Strategies and Cognitive Strategies to improve their speaking abilities. According to a study by Haida Umiera Hashim (2018), all respondents tend to use all three kinds of language learning processes, cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. However, a study by Yasmin et al (2018) titled "Language Learning Strategies Used by Secondary School Students in Enhancing Speaking

Skills" contradicts the findings of this paper, which concluded that strategies to enhance speaking skills include practising, communication, and compensation strategies. Since suggestions, it is desired that future research would increase the number of samples and populations, as this study was done with a single Form 5 class.

Conclusion

The first objective of the research was to identify the strategies employed by students to enhance their speaking performance. The researchers concluded that the student's primary strategies most frequently used were cognitive and social to improve their speaking ability. Secondly, to identify the preferred Language Learning Strategies by female students of a Convent school in Selangor in terms of speaking skills, the strategies used by the students were cognitive and social. As for cognitive strategy, the students tend to practice, analyze, and create the products, whereas, in the social strategy, the students ask for clarification from their friends, teachers, and family. This concludes this study's findings.

It is worth noting the limitation of the research, which includes the lack of understanding among the students regarding the various learning strategies that may have been used during English Language lessons. In addition, especially those with a solid English language foundation may not be paying attention to the strategies embedded in their classroom as their focus may be more on effectively attempting the given task and performing well in the examination in the future. The teachers themselves may not use some learning strategies that exist. Therefore, the effectiveness of those strategies could not be observed. Further research on the preferred learning strategies should also include the teacher's perception of the efficient learning strategies that significantly impact the student's learning.

It is also essential to introduce the students and teachers with sufficient knowledge of all the learning strategies available for adequate language teaching and learning. This would create awareness among teachers and students regarding applying a broad range of learning strategies before deciding on their most preferred one. Moreover, being explicit about the different learning strategies, as in how each learning strategy takes place in a particular lesson, may enlighten the students on the various strategies used by the teachers while providing them a clear idea when making choices of their preferred language learning strategies, thus making the findings more reliable. Another suggestion would be to offer more open-ended questions and a focus group for the students to respond. This would elicit a personalized response and enable students to describe in-depth how they like the teaching to be done rather than restricting them with prenotion ideas that would appear in the given questionnaire.

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