

STUDENTS' LEARNING STRATEGIES USED IN IMPROVING THEIR SPEAKING PERFORMANCE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the language skills that students, particularly English department students, should develop. In order to master the act of speaking English, students should have a strategy that they can employ. This study explored how students improve their speaking performance while learning English. More particularly, this study explored the strategies students use to develop their speaking performance. A narrative inquiry was employed in this study. Three excelled students in the English department of a private university in Surabaya participated in this study. The results of this study showed various strategies that students used to improve their speaking performance. They included direct strategies consisting of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies; and indirect strategies consisting of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Among these strategies, the compensation strategy was the least used, and the affective strategy was used in all kinds of situations by students who excelled in their speaking performance.

Keywords: *speaking, learning strategies, narrative inquiry*

INTRODUCTION

English, as lingua Franca, has become the language that is widely used by people of different backgrounds as a means to communicate, especially in this global era (Jenkins, 2009). Even though people come from different nation, ethnicity, culture, etc., they can communicate with each other by using English. To be able to communicate, an individual must be able to speak to other individuals. Speaking is the ability to express oneself in life situation, or the ability to report acts or situations in precise words, or the ability to converse, or to express a sequence of idea fluently (Lado, 1960). This implies that in order to be able to communicate properly, an individual should have the ability to convey or express an idea to other people.

As one of the language skills, speaking especially for the students of English department, is supposed to be developed. In reality, some students have shown excellent speaking performance but others have shown poor speaking performance. According to the literature, students' speaking performance has been largely affected by the ways they do to develop and improve their speaking performance. To master the act of speaking, students need to be able to speak properly and have a strategy that they can follow and that suit their own needs. Ortega (2009) defines learning strategies as various conscious mental and behavioral procedures that people employ to gain control over their learning

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process. Oxford (1990) found that students have various kinds of learning strategies that are unique to individual students, which can be seen from their behavior that consists of how they adapt, grasp, and internalize information so that they can understand the information conveyed. Oxford categorizes learning strategies into two classes: direct and indirect. Direct strategies consist of memory strategies used to store information, cognitive strategies used to understand learning, and compensation strategies used to overcome problems caused by lack of knowledge. Indirect strategies consist of metacognitive strategies that are used to regulate the learners' learning process, affective strategies that are used to affect the learners' mental state, and social strategies that involve other individuals to improve learning.

In the last few decades, there have been considerable numbers of studies highlighting the potential role of learning strategies, most of which confirmed that the use of learning strategies greatly brings positive effects on the students' mastery of English (e. g., Gençler, 2015; Sofwan et al., 2015; Wael et al., 2018). Research on learning strategies conducted by Saputra and Subekti (2017) showed that the correlation between the score of the questionnaire revolving around learning strategies and the assessment results of the students was significant, which means that speaking learning strategies can affect their speaking scores in classrooms. Students who have access to many learning strategies may display better results than those who do not know many learning strategies. Therefore, the writers are trying to uncover the students' ways of making improvements. Especially those who excel in speaking. The reason behind it is that knowing the learning strategies of those students in improving their speaking performances can be shared with the rest of the students in class. Based on the background mentioned above, the study was to answer the research question: How do students who excel in speaking experience the improvement of their speaking performance in a language learning context? It is expected that the results of this study can be used to assist teaching activities and then proceed to tackle some of the students' most common problems so that they can improve their speaking skills even more.

Learning Strategies in Speaking

In recent years, various studies have been conducted to explore learning strategies (Alfian, 2021; Aziz & Shah, 2020; Dawadi, 2017; Dorand, 2020; Hashim et al., 2018; Oflaz, 2019; Salam et al., 2020; Wael et al., 2018; Zakaria et al., 2018). It is certainly not something new to talk about in the education field. However, the present study employed a narrative inquiry method to collect the data and this method is not frequently used in this research topic.

Ortega (2009) defines learning strategies as the various conscious mental and behavioral procedures that people employ with the aim to gain control over their learning process. A more specific definition of learning strategies in the area of language learning was proposed by Chamot (as cited in Wael et al, 2018). According to Chamot, learning strategies are techniques, approaches, or thoughtful actions that students take to learn and remember linguistic information and content areas. Oxford (1990) divides language learning strategies into two main categories: direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are strategies that contribute directly to learning, namely memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. Indirect strategies are strategies that indirectly affect learning, namely metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Memory strategies are techniques used to remember more effectively to retrieve and transfer information needed for future language use. The use of memory helps students store important memories from their learning activities. When the information is needed, the students are prepared to recall it. Memory strategies include creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing actions. There are options for students to break down information into small parts so that they can manage it for future use.

Cognitive strategies are techniques used to help students manipulate the target language or task correctly using all their processes. These include reasoning, analysis, repetition, organizing new language, summarizing and dressing the meaning in context, using imagery for memorization, and drawing conclusions. Another example is the use of repetition, which involves repeating the learning that you wish to undertake several times to allow your brain or body to retain the information or skills as necessary. A participant from the research conducted by Abrar (2012) revealed that he often asked for repetition of the information or the words that had been said whenever he did not understand it multiple times.

Compensation strategies are strategies employed by students to compensate for knowledge of the target language due to a lack of vocabulary. The strategies assist students in writing or speaking the target language, even with limited vocabulary. The function of using this strategy is to “compensate” for the lack of grammar or vocabulary. Based on a study by Syafryadin et al. (2020), compensation can be calculated in several ways, such as selecting students' own topic so they can control the flow of the conversation by avoiding topics that they are not confident in. They continued by approximating the message to avoid showing the communication gap by using mimes or gestures.

Metacognitive strategies are strategies employed by students to coordinate the learning process by centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating their learning. This helps learners control their own learning by gaining full control over their entire learning process through self-evaluation. Examples of metacognitive strategies include planning how to approach a learning task, using appropriate skills and strategies to solve a problem, monitoring one's own comprehension of text, self-assessing and self-correcting in response to the self-assessment, evaluating progress toward the completion of a task, and becoming aware of distracting stimuli.

Affective strategies are techniques used to help students control their emotions, attitudes, motivations, and values. These strategies are used to manipulate students' emotions to suit the situation as the need arises. Manipulation of emotions can take many forms, for example, lowering anxiety by doing things to encourage oneself and finding the right time to relax, trying to reward oneself, and trying to let out emotions by talking to other people. Examples of affective strategies have been reported by Yuniar et al. (2021) and include activities such as playing relaxing and calming music to gain control of students' emotions, followed by games, giving away compliments, and the distribution of goods and scores.

Social strategies are various activities that students do while engaging in opportunities to be exposed to social gatherings. These strategies take full advantage of the activeness of students and humans as social creatures. Students who use these strategies will often associate themselves with various or large groups of people to satisfy their social interaction needs while simultaneously collecting information from their peers and improving themselves. An example of the application of social strategies inside speaking classes has been done by Yuniar et al. (2021), which includes activities such as group work that revolve around group discussion and group presentations.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Learning Strategy

Learning strategies are used to help students through the learning process. The use of these strategies is expected to help students increase their learning efficiency and effectiveness. The presence of learning strategies is critical for students because it can also serve as an indicator of how they face their problems. It can also shape them into more independent individuals because they are in control of their own learning. It is important for learning strategies to be recognized and implemented; only then can they be improved.

Learning strategies may have some disadvantages if they are not used to their full potential. The unawareness of proper learning strategies is a factor that holds back learning strategies. Even when a learning strategy is recommended to the students, it does not guarantee that it will work every time. Learning strategies should be personalized to the needs of the students; however, if the wrong type is used, it can negatively impact students' speaking performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed narrative inquiry. This method is chosen over other methods because the narrative method, as an evolving approach, contributes to knowledge development in a meaningful and sustainable way, which can inform future practices for issues of great social importance (Bruce et al., 2016). According to Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik (2013), narrative inquiry is a research method that combines storytelling and research by retelling stories that will be used as research data or as a tool for data analysis or presentation of findings. Josselson (2007) added that narrative research consists of obtaining and reflecting on data from people's real experiences. In addition, data collection and procedures toward analysis were used to generate new knowledge using inductive reasoning from the participants' accounts.

The interview used in this study revolved around the theory of learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990). According to Moleong (2007), an interview is the act of two people meeting to exchange information through various questions and responses. An interview is required in this study to confirm the accuracy of the information through clarification with the subject. By doing so, researchers can obtain information in full detail directly from the student's viewpoint. The interview was conducted using the Zoom application and was recorded using Zoom.

The participants of this study were students in the English department of a private university in Surabaya. Three students were selected on the basis of three criteria: (1) the students must be in their fifth semester, (2) they must have received an "A" in their previous speaking classes, and (3) they must be recommended by the lecturers as capable and enthusiastic in their studies. The participant identity was kept confidential using the pseudonyms of Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Carlos: Basic Steps are Means to an End

From the story that Carlos shared, it seems that Carlos excelled in speaking while also being quite skilled in writing. The knowledge that he gained from writing also flowed over to his speaking side when he was asked about the steps that he took to improve his speaking.

From his experience, at first Carlos was afraid that his speaking abilities back then were inadequate to be able to go through college, but fortunately for him, his colleagues were in the same boat as him. At the beginning of college, he also incorporated various technological advancements to improve his speaking skills, such as Google Translate and ChatGPT as a reference and a place to reconsider his available options to solve his problems.

He also valued extended study of materials as one of his top priorities, and from there on, he would analyze various aspects of it, such as the context in which the word was used by doing repetition and note-taking activities. He also reflected on the things he could improve.

In all various aspects of speaking, he appreciated the company of his friends. He did not use it solely for one aspect of speaking, but he would gather with his friends to train their speaking skills in a win –win relationship. He would talk to them to help his communication while also getting advice from them to improve his speaking even more.

He also revealed the steps that he took in other aspects if they were similar to one another. He is also a very active student who has his own fears, but he did not let them control him; in contrast, it made him cautious to alleviate such fears. He is also a grand planner who looks into the future that he would encounter someday so he can be called a visionary student so the answers that he has in his motivation to improve his speaking align with his previous conversation and that is to reach a certain goal. He would also use the opinions of others and expectations of others to advance his speaking abilities.

Brianna: All Progress Will Strengthen the Roots

From the story that Brianna shared, it seems that she saw her advancement in language as a means to strengthen her core. And by doing so much progression she kept on improving her core even though she herself said that her most proficient aspect was pronunciation she kept on improving it.

From her experience, at first, Brianna was afraid that her speaking abilities back then were inadequate to be able to go through college; she paid close attention to the words that she uttered so that she did not make any mistakes. This is also because of her lack of grammar depth that she experienced in high school and not only because the lecturers who would teach her were lecturers who had made English their main profession so they would see her through higher standards. The solution that she made was for her to not think too much about it and just keep the conversation flowing. To improve her grammar in speaking even further, she would often use the TOEFL test and Duolingo.

She often planned the words that she wanted to say, but each time she would adapt her choice of words depending on the circumstances and people she would talk to. She also uses body language to help her convey messages to other people. She would also learn vocabulary and pronunciation at the same time. She would also self-monitor herself to keep track of her progress.

Her friends also played a strong role in improving her speaking abilities. They enriched each other's vocabulary, kept each other in check when it came to mistakes, and last but not least, they also gave each other the opportunity to do critical thinking.

Besides grammar and vocabulary, most of the steps that she took to improve her speaking were through the involvement of other people. The trouble with her speaking stemmed from having to deal with other individuals, and the things that were affected were her nervousness and her speaking speed. Even though her problems stemmed from her social interaction, she still used social interaction to conquer that problem. At the core, she is a problem solver; she tried to solve her problem separately, and at the same time, she is a learner who valued basic skills more than anything else. She is not a perfectionist, but she still pays attention to her basic skills. However, by returning to her roots, she believed that she could improve her overall speaking performance.

Gregoria: Conveying Passion and Companionship

From the story that Gregoria shared, it seems that she excelled in speaking while also being very passionate about speaking as a whole. Even when she was asked to describe the steps that she took to improve her speaking in college from time to time, she would repeat what she had experienced in her past. It showed her passion for speaking from a very young age.

From her experience, Gregoria, in general, did not experience any difficulties in speaking, and she was not afraid of using English as a speaking outlet. However, this did not free her from difficulties. At the beginning, she felt nervous speaking in public, and she also felt afraid of lecturers who were professionals in their subject. In her opinion, her performance fell off by a slight margin due to the different environment that online and offline gave. Her offline experience was worse because her friends became more active than her, which led her not to answer questions as much as she did online because the answer had already been mentioned by her friends.

She would follow examples obtained from various media to recall and mimic the sounds that she heard and the things she saw. This method improved both her vocabulary and pronunciation at the same time, and depending on the context, she learned various usages for different words. With regard to grammar, she relied on her note-taking skills and the explanations that she heard from other people.

Gregoria showed that she often relied on other people as a source of information and emotional support. She also showed that when she spoke too fast to her friends, she would collect herself and slowed down her pace so that her speech could be heard by other people. She also said that the best way to gain more knowledge and improve herself was when she was explained to by other people.

She revealed that her main way of improving herself lied in her habit of adapting to certain situations, and by repeating similar events, she minimized the problem and hence improved her speaking performance. She did put the aspect of speaking in her mind when speaking, but the most important thing in her opinion was for her to get her points across. She is the type of learner who would succeed if nurtured and given proper advice and compliments by others. She remembered occurrences that happened in the past, such as praises that stood her and led her to love speaking more and to keep on improving. At the same time, the people that she looked through social media also served as her motivators and goals that she wanted, and those were also the main reasons why she studied in the first place.

Discussion

Memory strategies are the ways that students use to recall any information that they need. According to Oxford (1990) memory strategies include creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing actions. The stories of Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria showed that they all used memory strategies to some extent, although they did not use it as often as other strategies. Carlos used Google Translate to recall the correct pronunciation of a certain word. The application was equipped with the phonetic transcription and the ability to use a speaker to read out the words typed or said inside it, so it served as a correct example. Brianna would write down vocabularies from a film and search for pronunciation in Google. Based on that, it can be said that Carlos and Brianna used auditory and visual linkage to remember some vocabularies based on the vocabularies that they saw or heard. This type of memory strategies is also found in the study by Wael et al. (2018), where one of the participants also used the same type of strategy.

For Gregoria, she associated unique words to differentiate the nouns and modifier. However, Gregoria also expressed her unawareness on how to recall grammar when it came to speaking in public. This explanation is also supported by the findings of the study by Saputra and Subekti (2017) that students who have access to many learning strategies may display better results compared to those who do not know many learning strategies this implies that not everyone knew learning strategies.

The results of this study are opposite to those of the study by Wael et al. (2018). In their study, memory strategies were found to be the most commonly used, whereas in this study, the majority of subjects reported using

cognitive strategies to remember information. This difference may be attributed to the deliberate selection of subjects with excellent scores in this study.

According to Oxford (1990), cognitive strategies are techniques used to help students manipulate the target language or task correctly using all their processes. These include reasoning, analysis, repetition, organizing new language, summarizing and dressing the meaning from context, using imagery for memorization, and drawing conclusions.

Based on the stories told by Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria, it can be seen that they all had an extreme affinity for cognitive strategies. All of the subjects used cognitive strategies in their strategies for learning the most common repeated one was repetition, mostly the repetition of words in their pronunciation training. This is also in line with the results of a study conducted by Abrar (2019), which revealed that the subject often asked for repetition of the information or the words that had been said whenever he did not understand it multiple times. Carlos also asked for repetition of words that were not stated clearly.

The other most commonly used cognitive strategies used by the subjects were their note-taking activities, especially in their grammar improvement. Carlos analyzes grammatical elements such as clauses and noun phrases. Brianna would use TOEFL grammar exercises repeatedly to increase her knowledge. Gregoria would also take notes in grammar classes.

In this study, it was found that compensation strategies were not commonly used by students. This could be attributed to the fact that these strategies are typically used to compensate for deficiencies in grammar or vocabulary, as stated by Oxford (1990). The participants in this study were high-achieving students in speaking; therefore, they used other strategies instead of compensation strategies. However, this does not imply that compensation strategies were completely absent in their language use. Brianna admitted the rare usage of gestures to help her convey what was in her mind.

Gregoria explained that she would try to avoid certain topics that she believed she did not understand; this is in line with the findings of Syafradin et al. (2020). Examples of compensation strategies include actions to control the flow of the conversation by avoiding topics that they are not confident in. They continued by approximating the message to avoid revealing the communication gap using mime or gestures. Carlos would try to skip over the words that he had forgotten by continuing to speak, and after he remembered, he would return to the words that he had previously forgotten.

Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria used metacognitive strategies to reflect on their mistakes and achievements in speaking and as a plan before starting their speaking activities. According to Oxford (1990), metacognitive strategies revolve around planning how to approach a learning task, using appropriate skills and strategies to solve a problem, monitoring one's own comprehension of text, and self-assessing and self-correcting in response to self-assessment.

There were some strategies that Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria had in common in their planning phase. They prepared it before they talked to others, what was the context of the conversation, and what tenses they should use. Carlos planned his plans, and the content was determined by consulting with ChatGPT. Brianna planned things in advance when she faced a lecturer. She determined which tenses she would use depending on the context, and this would fall into the planning category of metacognitive strategies. They also reviewed their past speaking activities and uncovered their own mistakes to improve their next speaking activities. This self-reflection appears when Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria feel that they have failed at something. Brianna used a different strategy than the other subjects.

She spoke to herself in front of the mirror to monitor herself. Gregoria demonstrated her adaptability to improve herself based on her past experiences.

According to a study by Oxford (1990), the manipulation of emotions can take many forms, such as lowering anxiety by doing things to encourage oneself and finding the right time to relax. Based on the data in this study, the affective strategies' that were used the most often were those related mostly to motivations, and this strategy was used most to counteract the psychological problems that the students had. Gregoria would calm herself down to regain her composure and continue her speaking activities.

Carlos, on some occasions, would reward himself by watching films or playing games. This is also in line with the findings of the study by Yuniar et al. (2021), who showed some forms of affective strategies such as playing relaxing and calming music to gain control of the student's emotion, followed by games, and then by giving away complements, and then followed by distribution of goods and scores.

In the context of affective strategies, Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria had different forms of motivation that were unique to each of them. This is also in line with Oxford's (1990) explanation that strategies from students to students are unique. All of the motivations that Carlos showed stemmed from the fact that he was a student in the English department and his possible future job requirement. Brianna was determined to improve herself and not to make mistakes. Finally, but not least, Gregoria was her wish for the future.

Carlos, Brianna, and Gregoria deployed their own form of social strategies, but they shared one characteristics: all of them gathered in groups to speak and discuss various materials that they had learnt, and from the data gathered, they would gather to discuss speaking as a whole and then help each other. Based on Oxford (1990), students who use these strategies will often associate themselves with various or large groups of people to satisfy their social interaction needs while simultaneously collecting information from their peers and improving themselves. In addition, Gregoria showed a characteristic that was shared between affective and social strategies. She was the type of student who thrived from motivation and the presence of other people.

The participants in this present study were all high achievers and employed many strategies in their speaking journey. This means that the students who excelled are also students who employed various strategies to support their learning. This result is in line with some studies (e. g., Anastasia, 2022; Safari & Fitriati, 2016) indicating that learners with high speaking performance used all kinds of strategies in learning speaking. They employed the strategies in the equal degree of frequency.

In addition, this result also agrees with Saputra and Subekti's (2017) discovery, which revealed a positive correlation between learning strategies and academic achievement. Students who have access to many learning strategies may display better results than those who do not know many learning strategies. Even though the participants in this study shared the same place to learn English, they displayed many similarities and differences in their ways of improving their English. This observation is in line with Wael et al. (2018), who found that various learning strategies implemented by all students showed that students' psychology, teacher, task, environment, and social factors affected their learning strategies.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have shown that high achievers employ almost all categories of learning strategies, with the strategies classified into 6 categories. The way in which they used the strategies was mixed on top of one another, which led to improvements in other strategies. The strategies that were used complimented each other, which

led to the same improvement that was achieved using strategies that were not used mainly to improve one aspect. Learning strategies themselves are the methods that students use to help them solve problems and assist them in their studies, and the strategies used are influenced by their surroundings. The strategies are personalized to meet the needs and personality of each student. Despite their own unique identities, the learning strategies used by the students showed similar characteristics. There are many similarities between the strategies used by the students to improve their speaking performance. The usage of similar learning strategies is due to their similarity as students who achieved high scores in speaking, and they are in the same school year, so the events that they encountered are similar in some cases. The similarity of the strategies found shows that some strategies are best used to solve certain problems.

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