

# The Effect of Learning Strategies on the Speaking Ability of Iranian Students in the Context of Language Institutes

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**ABSTRACT---** *Language learning strategies are of the most important factors that help language learners to learn a foreign language and how they can deal with the four language skills specifically speaking skill effectively. Acknowledging the great impact of learning strategies on learners' achievement in different contexts, this survey study aimed at providing insights into figuring out if learning strategies can influence the speaking ability of language learners within the framework of private language centers. To this end, 60 homogeneous language learners studying at a private language center in Shiraz, Iran, were randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. The experimental group received the strategy-instruction along with their usual conversation, and the control group received their usual nonstrategic instruction throughout a semester. At the outset of the study both groups were given two pre-tests, an interview to test their speaking ability and a questionnaire to check their awareness of the strategies. The same instruments were given to the participants as post-tests at the very end of the semester. Using descriptive statistics, the findings of this study showed that instruction of the strategies makes a positive significant difference in the learners' use of the strategies in private language centers. The study will discuss the implications of the research.*

**Key words----** Learning strategy, speaking proficiency

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the main factors that help EFL students how to learn a foreign language and how to deal with the four language skills specifically speaking skill effectively are language learning strategies. This survey study has been conducted to find out whether learning strategies can affect language learners' speaking ability and to investigate the probable relationship between learners' use of learning strategies and improvement in their speaking proficiency within the framework of private language centers. To do so, as many as 60 homogeneous language learners studying at a private language center in Shiraz, Iran, were randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. The experimental group received the strategy-instruction along with their usual conversation, and the control group received their usual nonstrategic instruction throughout a semester. At the outset of the study both groups were given two pre-tests, an interview to test their speaking ability and a questionnaire to check their awareness of the strategies. The same instruments were given to the participants as post-tests at the very end of the semester. Applying descriptive statistics, the findings of this study were indicative of the fact that strategy instruction results in a positive significant difference in the learners' strategy use in private language centers. The implications of the research have also been elaborated.

## 2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

English ability is the only passport to enter a competitive global community where abilities in communication become highly increasing needs for many people. To enhance competitiveness, EFL learners are eager to possess one or more of the recognized certificates of English proficiency. However, English proficiency tests nowadays are different from those in the past. In addition to the testing of listening, reading, and writing, the testing of speaking has also come to the head. In other words, testing the ability to speak in English has gradually been required in English proficiency tests.

In order to help English learners become more effective and successful communicators, language institutes have extended many courses and teachers use various methods such as discussions, story-telling, role-playing, oral presentation, to arouse learners' interests in speaking English, to enhance and facilitate learners' communicative ability (Chang, 2002).

What can students do themselves? Among the several suggestions offered, the engagement in learning strategies receives the highest attention of so many researchers. The importance of teaching learning strategies to learners and its role in educating more successful learners has been emphasized in academic career. In a well-known study, Wenden and Rubin (1987, p.19) define learning strategies as "... any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information". For Cohen (1998), language learning strategies are "the conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of improving their knowledge of the target language". Language learning strategies, if chosen carefully and consciously, can play as a key factor in an active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation learning. Accordingly, in order to increase language learning academically, learners are to be taught how to learn more effectively and efficiently.

Language learning strategy plays a key role in learning a second language. It is axiomatic that language learning strategy is one of the most widely accepted means to enhance learners' efficiency since it can help students when mastering the forms and functions in second language acquisition and thus affects achievement (Bialystock, 1981; Rubin, 1981). According to Holec (1981), Oxford (1989), and Oxford and Nyikos (1989), some language learning strategies can promote learners' independence in language learning. Once employing effective and appropriate strategies to develop speaking proficiency, students become more self-governing learners and benefit from the use of language learning strategies.

In the last three decades, language learning strategies and some related issues based on the choice and use of learning strategies have been under investigation. These issues are level of language proficiency of learners, their motivation, gender, cultural backgrounds, learning style, nationality and the context where they learn language (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Ellis, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Wharton, 2000; Griffiths, 2003; Chamot, 2005). Students in various cultural situations are reported to express a preference for some learning strategies. In a study in China, Chinese students showed a preference for social strategies but not affective strategies (Tamada, 1996). For Rahimi et al. (2005), learners' motivation and their proficiency level are of the most important element in the use of language learning strategies. The difference between learners' use of different language learning strategies was found to be of great importance. Based on some studies, it has been found that in order to have more successful language learners, it is necessary to teach learning strategies as part of syllabuses to less successful language learners. (Oxford, 1993).

Several researchers believe that more successful learners use a broader range of strategies efficiently and effectively (Green and Oxford, 1995; Lan and Oxford, 2003; Oxford, 1996; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Philips, 1991; Gan et al. 2004; and Griffiths, 2008). Learners tend to use different learning strategies in different situations since language is socially mediated and context dependent. In Iran, for example, in the past three decades, because of some social and political issues, there has been little or no contact between EFL learners and English native speakers. Moreover, language teaching is mostly grammar-based with no attention paid to language.

The common observation that learners exposed to common instruction procedures exhibit varying degrees of success in language learning and the concept of language acquisition as the spontaneous development of language even without instruction have shifted researchers' concerns from methods and products of language teaching to processes in language learning known as language learning strategies. Recent studies conducted in different contextual backgrounds have shown that strategies promote language development.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Sampling procedure**

In this research, Bahar Language Institute was chosen through convenient sampling. This study was conducted with a total number of 104 language learners. They were selected by random sampling based on Morgan's formula with confidence level of 95% (margin of error=5%). The participants were selected from the same English proficiency level. After administering a test of homogeneity (OPT), the researcher selected 60 learners on intermediate levels. Then they were randomly divided into two groups of experimental and control. The experimental group received the strategy-instruction along with their usual conversation, and the control group received their usual nonstrategic instruction throughout a semester, i.e. being taught conversation in the traditional way.

#### **3.2. Instrument**

To collect the data use was made of the Oxford Quick Placement Test to achieve the current level of the participants' English proficiency. It is a test of English language proficiency which is developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL. It is flexible and enables teachers to have a method to find out how proficient the learners are in English. The other instrument adopted in the current study was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which was proposed by Oxford (1990) and has been created to measure how much students are aware of the strategies. It is a 50-item Likert-type questionnaire with five-scale responses regarding the six major strategy groups ranging from 1=never true of me to 5=always true of me. Another standard test was a test of speaking, Preliminary English Test (PET), to assess candidates' ability to express themselves in order to carry out functions at CEFR level.

**3.3. Data collection and analysis**

Sixty learners out of the total number of 104 intermediate students who met the expected score in the test of proficiency were randomly divided into two groups of control and experimental, each with 30 learners. In order to compare the performance of the learners in both groups before and after the treatment, the Oxford SILL as well as the speaking test was administered to them as pretests and posttests. The above procedures were done in the first week of the summer term, 2013. Then the researcher started to teach the usual conversation to both groups, as well as 3 to 4 strategies to the experimental group. In the last week of the term, in order to see if any improvement has occurred in learners' strategy awareness and their speaking ability, the SILL questionnaire and the speaking test were both administered to the learners in both groups. In this quantitative study, the researcher made extensive use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 16 to conduct data analysis. Descriptive statistics, in particular, were employed to shed light on the effect of using language learning strategies on the speaking improvement.

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The researcher carried out the analysis and tested the hypotheses after collecting the data.

**4.1. Results of OPT (Oxford Placement Test)**

To check the homogeneity of the total participants (population=104), a sample test of OPT (Oxford Placement Test) was administered. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of participants' scores.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Homogenizing Test (OPT)**

Test	Mean	SD	N
OPT	25	5	104

Based on the results in Table 1, the mean is 25 and the standard deviation is 5. Here, just the participants (N=60) who receive scores within 5 SD below and above the mean, i.e. between 20 and 30 were allowed to take part in both groups. The other participants (44) were left out. The chosen participants were randomly set into two groups of control and experimental each with thirty members.

In order for the participants (60) to be homogeneous in both control (30) and experimental (30) groups, descriptive statistics are given in Table 2.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Proficiency Test in Control and Experimental Group**

Test	group	N	Mean	SD
OPT	cont.	30	24.83	2.87
	Exp.	30	24.46	2.20

According to Table 2 the mean of the experimental group (M=24.46) in the proficiency test is a bit lower than that of the control group (M=24.83) but the difference is very marginal. So it can be seen here that there is not a major difference between the obtained means of the two groups.

**4.2. Results of Pretests**

In order to compare the participants' performance on the speaking test and SILL questionnaire in both experimental and control groups, two independent t-tests were administered at the outset of the study

**Table 3: Independent Samples Test of Speaking Pretest**

Speaking pretest	Levine's test		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	T	DF	Sig (2tailed)	Mean difference	Std	Lower	Upper
equal variance assumed	6.175	<b>.016</b>	1.793	58	<b>.078</b>	.31667	.17663	-.03689	.67023
Equal variance not assumed			1.793	51.321	<b>.079</b>	31667.	.17663	-.03787	.67121

As shown in Table 3, the result obtained from this statistical analysis showed that the two groups did not have significant differences in their performance on their speaking pretest. (sig = .078, p>0.05)

**Table 4: Independent Samples Test of SILL Pretest**

SILL pretest	Levine's		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	T	DF	Sig (2tailed)	Mean difference	Std	Lower	Upper
equal variance assumed	.151	<b>.699</b>	1.026-	58	<b>.309</b>	-.4.933	4.808	-14.558	4.691
Equal variance not assumed			1.026	57.977	<b>.309</b>	-4.933	4.808	-14.558	4.691

As shown in Table 4, the result obtained from this statistical analysis showed that the participants in two groups did not differ greatly in their performance on SILL pretest (Sig=.309, p>0.05).

#### 4.3. Results of Posttests

In order to compare the participants' performance on speaking test and SILL questionnaire in both experimental and control groups, the same pretest was administered as the posttest. Two independent t-test analyses were carried out to compare their scores in the two instruments. After the treatment and exposing the experimental group to different learning strategies, again, in order to see if the two groups performed statistically different on their speaking skill, the raw scores obtained from the administration of the speaking posttest underwent an independent t-test.

**Table 5: Independent Samples Test of the Speaking Posttest**

Speaking posttest	Levine's		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	DF	Sig (2tailed)	Mean difference	Std	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
equal variance assumed	10.380	<b>.002</b>	-6.623	58	.000	-1.0000	.15099	-1.30223	-.69777
Equal variance not assumed			-6.623	49.000	<b>.000</b>	-1.0000	.15099	-1.30223	-.69658

As it is shown in Table 5, the scores of the members in strategy group exceed those in non-strategy group and determine an important difference in the speaking ability of the participants after the treatment.

After the treatment and exposing the experimental group to a variety of learning strategies, in order to see if the two groups performed statistically different in SLL posttest, they were given the questionnaire of SILL at the end of the term. To compare the experimental group's involvement in learning strategies performance, a paired t-test was used to see if any improvement occurred in the experimental group's knowledge of strategies during the term.

**Table 6: Independent Samples Test of SILL Posttest**

SILL posttest	Levine's		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	DF	Sig (2tailed)	Mean difference	Std	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
equal variance assumed	2.30	<b>.134</b>	-7.498	58	.000	-42.433	5.659	-53.761	-31.405
Equal variance not assumed			-7.498	55.013	<b>.000</b>	-42.433	5.659	-53.774	-31.092

By virtue of table 6, it can be stated that the integration of learning strategies into the syllable prompted the students' knowledge of learning strategies. After being exposed to the strategies, the experimental group had a better performance in their strategy use.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Several researchers maintain that learning strategies are teachable. Like learners in other contexts, the students in this study were predisposed to employ language learning strategies when they participated in speaking tasks. This required knowledge of the strategy taxonomies and individual strategy terms which they could pick and employ appropriately. This study aimed at examining the effect of learning strategies employed by learners for sharpening their English speaking proficiency in English language institutes. Based on the findings of this successful research, second language learners show a greater tendency to make use of language learning strategies more frequently and efficiently than less successful ones.

The result of this study also indicated that it is possible to teach learning strategies to Iranian English learners. Teaching strategies help learners improve their speaking ability. Apparently, the explicit strategy instruction is considered to be effective in improving students' ability to speak more fluently and effectively. In order for learners to communicate their ideas and fulfill their goals in a second language, they need to know learning strategies. The integration of learning strategies in the classroom influenced the students' speaking skill positively.

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