

## **The Effect of EFL student's' level of Proficiency and Gender on their use of speaking strategies**

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### **Abstract**

This study is an attempt to investigate the effect of EFL students' level of proficiency and gender on their use of speaking strategies in a specific domain, namely, an Iranian university. 168 university students (100 female and 68 male) participated in the study and took a standard English proficiency test on the basis of that they were divided into three groups of high, intermediate, and low proficiency levels. Also, a 47-item speaking strategy questionnaire with a Likert-type Scale was administered to these students. Results indicated that proficiency level had a significant effect on the students overall pattern of speaking strategy use. Whereas female students showed a consistently greater interest in using speaking strategies, no statistical significance was observed between male and female students using speaking strategies. While the findings of the present study support the previous research studies on the effect of proficiency on strategy use (see, for example, Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1995; Sugeng, 1997), no such a relationship was observed between gender and strategies use in the way the findings of the previous research did.

### **1. Introduction**

Producing the target language (orally or in writing) is one of the most demanding tasks for language learners in general, and ESL/EFL learners in particular. We have noticed that students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have many difficulties in using the target language for oral and written communication. While they may be proficient students in other language skills and components, especially

grammar, their ability to produce language orally or in writing is questionable.

As the focus of attention has shifted from the teacher to the learner in recent years, more learner-centered instructional models of language teaching are becoming popular (Nyikos and Oxford, 1993). Of considerable importance in such models has been the relationship between the use of language learning strategies and success in mastering a new language.

Communication strategies, a subset of language learning strategies, have been defined as “the means that speakers use to solve their communication problems” (Paribakht, 1985, p. 132). In another definition by Tarone (1981), an oral communication strategy is defined as a conscious attempt made by the speaker in communicative situations in order to overcome structural inadequacies to convey his/her thought.

In the present study, speaking strategies (SSs) are defined as those means to which EFL students resort to improve their speaking skill especially when confronting a communicative problem in their English conversations, in both spontaneous and non-spontaneous speaking situations.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

Investigating language learning strategies in the field of SLA is relatively new. In the early 1970s when researchers tended to show their interest “in the cognitive abilities that language learners bring to the task of acquiring another language” (Wenden, 1986, p. 186), one of the focal points was language learning strategies.

Within the field of language learning strategies, some researchers have been interested in and have studied communication strategies. The pioneer in studying communication strategies as used by L2 speakers was Selinker (1972) who described communication strategies as a by-product of the learners’ attempt to express meaning in spontaneous speech with their limited target language system. Since then, communication strategies have attracted more attention and a large body of research has focused on discovering the most common types of strategies used by learners through different investigation procedures (Scholfield, 1987; Riazi and Rahimi, 2005). A whole issue of *TESL-EJ journal* (2003) was devoted to the studies of language learning strategies. Also, use of LLS's in different language skills and components has been the focus of some studies (see, e.g., Cohen and Aphek 1980, 1981; Riazi and Mir, 2002; and Riazi and Alviri, 2004).

## 2.1 Different Views on Learning Strategies

Since 1970, research on learning strategies has tremendously grown up. According to Nyikos and Oxford (1993, p. 11) this growing interest in learning strategies is, for the most part, due "to increased attention to the learner and to learner-centered instructional models of teaching" which can be attributed to the "recognition that learning begins with the learner". This view considers the learner as an active member in the teaching learning process, and hence the influence of teaching will be determined, to some extent, by what the learner already knows and does in the whole process.

Nyikos and Oxford (1993) believed that one of the reasons some learners are not successful in their learning can be attributed to their lack of awareness of strategy use. They argued that most learners are not aware of the different types of strategies they use or even of the variety of different learning strategies at their disposal. They contended that "successful application of learning strategies depends on the awareness of 1) one's current strategy use; 2) the wide range of alternative strategies that might be helpful; and 3) the circumstances under which a given strategy can most effectively be applied" (p. 13).

A large body of research on language learning strategies reveals that there are many variables influencing the degree of use of language learning strategies by learners. These variables include learners' personality factors, level of language proficiency, gender, age, cultural differences, career choice, psychological type, and motivation (c.f. O'Malley et al., 1985; Paribakht, 1985; Huang and Naerssen, 1987; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Crookall, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Ehrman and Oxford, 1990; Si-Qing, 1990; Oxford, 1993; Hyland, 1993; Nyikos and Oxford, 1993; Hashim and Syed Sahil, 1994; Green and Oxford, 1995; Ehrman and Oxford, 1995; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Khanji, 1996; Sugeng, 1997; Afsarnia, 1999).

In the present study students' level of proficiency and gender are taken into consideration as two important variables in EFL contexts.

Results of many studies (see, e.g., Bialystok, 1983; O'Malley et al., 1985; Paribakht, 1985; Oxford and Crookall, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Khanji, 1996; Abu Shamis, 2003) have confirmed the effect of language proficiency level on the use of communication strategy use and vice versa. That is, studies have indicated that the higher the proficiency level of the students, the more frequently and variety of strategies are used by

them. On the other hand, some research studies have indicated that strategy use contributes to students' proficiency development.

On the other hand, many studies concerning language learning strategy use have frequently reported a relationship between gender and strategy use (see, for example, Oxford, Nyikos, and Ehrman 1988; Oxford, 1993; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Green, 1991, 1992; Noguchi, 1991; Dreyer, 1992; Yang, 1992, 1993; Green and Oxford, 1993; and Oxford, 1993). Few studies have suggested females to have a distinct pattern of strategy use from males (Watanabe, 1990; Bedell, 1993 cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995). In some other studies males have shown a tendency to make greater use of individual strategies but not on the whole categories of strategies (Bedell, 1993; Green and Oxford, 1993 cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995).

According to the literature reviewed, it is evident that proficiency level and gender are the two most determining factors contributing to the choice of learning strategies by different language learners in both ESL and EFL situations and one cannot ignore their significance when studying learning strategies.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

The present study aimed at exploring the pattern of speaking strategies which Iranian EFL students use when speaking to both native and non-native speakers of English and in spontaneous and non-spontaneous speaking situations. In particular, the study intended to find answers to the following research questions.

1. What is the overall pattern of speaking strategy use of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Is there any difference between students' level of proficiency and their use of speaking strategies?
3. Is there any difference between students' gender and their use of speaking strategies?

Based on the findings from previous studies as reviewed above, it was hypothesized that there is a relationship between students' level of proficiency and their strategy use on the one hand, and their gender and choice of strategies on the other. Accordingly, the following two null hypotheses were tested as well.

H01: There is no relationship between students' level of English language proficiency and their use of speaking strategies.

H02: There is no relationship between students' gender and their use of speaking strategies.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Participants**

The participants in this study were 168 Iranian EFL undergraduate students majoring in English Literature, Teaching English, and English Translation. They were 100 females and 68 males. Due to the limitations on random sampling procedure, a convenient sampling was used to select the students. The students were assigned to three proficiency levels of high, intermediate, and low based on their scores on a standard proficiency test. %25 of the students with the highest scores were considered as high-proficiency group, and %25 of the students having the lowest scores were regarded as low-proficiency group, and the remaining %50 who fell in between were considered as the intermediate level students. Accordingly, 42 students were placed in the high group, 42 in the low group, and 84 in the intermediate group.

### **4.2 Instruments**

#### **4.2.1 The Speaking Strategy Questionnaire**

The main instrument used in this study was a 47-item questionnaire constructed on the basis of three sources: O'Malley et al. (1985), Huang and Naerssen (1987), and Oxford (1990). The answers to the items of the questionnaire ranged from "very often" (which was given a weight of 5) to "never" (which was given a weight of 1), and participants marked the choice which best fitted their own habits and behaviors regarding their speaking. A copy of the speaking strategy questionnaire is presented in the Appendix.

To check the reliability and validity of the speaking strategy questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 36 students learning English in a private institute. Doing a test-retest analysis in an interval of two weeks and through Pearson's index of correlation, a reliability measure of 0.94 was obtained. The validity of the strategy questionnaire was obtained through Alpha Cronbach index of internal consistency showing the degree of go togetherness of the items of the questionnaire. The Alpha index was shown to be 0.78.

#### **4.2.2 The Oxford Placement Test**

In order to determine the students' level of proficiency and assign them to high, intermediate, and low levels, a standard proficiency test

was used which was taken from Allan (1985). This test contained 30 items each with three choices.

The instructions for the two instruments were given both in writing and orally at the time of administration.

## 5. Results

The mean score for the whole sample in terms of using speaking strategies was 119.63 indicating that this specific group of EFL learners was not high strategy users. For females this mean was 122.92 which were above the sample mean, while for males it was 116.35 which were below the sample mean. The mean scores for the low, intermediate, and high proficiency groups, irrespective of the participants' gender, were 113.05, 119.8, and 126.05 respectively indicating a linear relationship between participants' level of proficiency and their tendency toward strategy use. Table 1 summarizes the participants' pattern of speaking strategy use.

**Table 1:** Mean scores for speaking strategy use by Gender and Level

|               | Level       |              |             | Total        |
|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
|               | Low         | Intermediate | High        |              |
| <b>Female</b> | 118.52 (25) | 122.30 (50)  | 127.94 (25) | 122.92 (100) |
| <b>Male</b>   | 107.59 (17) | 117.29 (34)  | 124.16 (17) | 116.35 (68)  |
| <b>Total</b>  | 113.05 (42) | 119.8 (84)   | 126.05 (42) | 119.63 (168) |

To find out whether the differences among participants' level of proficiency and gender and their pattern of speaking strategy use were significant or not, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with the proficiency level and gender as independent variables and rate of strategy use as the dependent variable. Results of the two-way ANOVA are presented in Table 2. As can be seen from Table 2, there is a significant main effect with the F ratio being significant at  $p < .01$  for the level variable. So we can reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between proficiency level and speaking strategy use. However, the null hypothesis of no relationship between gender and speaking strategy use is maintained since the F ratio is not shown to be significant for gender ( $F = 1.97$ ,  $p < .107$ ). No interaction effect was found between participants' proficiency level and gender and their pattern of speaking strategy use either.

**Table 2:** Analysis of variance on the effect of proficiency level and gender on strategy use

| Source of Variation                    | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean Square | F-Value | Level of Significance |
|----------------------------------------|----------------|----|-------------|---------|-----------------------|
| Main Effects                           | 3574.668       | 3  | 1191.556    | 4.198   | .007                  |
| Gender                                 | 745.132        | 1  | 745.132     | 2.625   | .107                  |
| Level                                  | 2829.536       | 2  | 1414.768    | 4.984   | .008                  |
| 2-Way Interactions<br>Gender,<br>Level | 1115.948       | 2  | 557.974     | 1.966   |                       |

In order to find out where the differences between the three levels of proficiency and the rate of strategy use were, a Scheffe test was performed. As Table 3 shows the difference was significant between the high and the low groups, while no significant difference was observed between low and intermediate and intermediate and high groups.

**Table 3:** Scheffe test for the difference between proficiency levels

| Mean   | Group        | Low | Intermediate | High |
|--------|--------------|-----|--------------|------|
| 113.05 | Low          |     |              |      |
| 119.8  | Intermediate |     |              |      |
| 126.05 | High         | *   |              |      |

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

### 6.1 Level of Proficiency and Strategy Use

Level of proficiency showed to affect the pattern of strategy use in this study. As indicated in Table 2, the F ratio was 4.98 at  $p < .01$ . Results of the Scheffe test indicated that, as observed in the previous research findings, high proficient students, including both males and females, made the greatest use of the speaking strategies as compared with intermediate and low level students. This finding is supported by some other research studies such as Bialystok (1983), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), Green (1992 cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995), Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), and Green and Oxford (1995). The most reasonable explanation for this finding might be that good

language learners resort to different techniques and strategies in order to acquire more language items and rules, probably explaining why they have managed to become successful language learners. Another explanation for this observation could be the fact that proficient EFL learners have free cognitive capacity to attend to language learning strategies; whereas the cognitive capacity of less proficient learners is more directly involved with linguistic aspects (lexicon, grammar, etc.) of language and information processing. Another possibility for this observation could be the fact that more proficient learners are aware of different types of strategies they use or have at their disposal so they can report the use of such strategies when they are surveyed through questionnaires. This awareness of using strategies called *strategic competence* by Canale and Swain (1980) can contribute, to a great extent, to the success of learning a new language. Less proficient learners could, therefore, be helped to improve their strategic competence along with other competences to become more successful learners.

Since no interaction was found between level of proficiency and gender in terms of strategy use in this study, it can be concluded that gender and proficiency level have acted independently for this specific group of learners.

## **6.2 Gender and Strategy Use**

The other independent variable in this study was gender. Despite the difference in the mean of strategy use for male and female students in favor of female students, the difference did not prove to be statistically significant. This finding is in contrast to previous research studies (Oxford et al., 1988; Ehrman and Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Green, 1991; Hyland, 1993; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995) which reported female learners proved to be higher strategy users. One point, however, is that in previous research usually male and female learners are compared on different categories of strategies, for example, metacognitive, cognitive, memory and socio-affective; whereas in the present study the two genders were compared on the overall use of speaking strategies. In other words, there would have probably been some differences between the two genders in terms of their speaking strategy use if we had considered different categories of strategies. The other explanation for this finding is the situation in that the study was conducted. Given the EFL context, as compared to ESL in most of the other studies, such a finding may seem natural. From the findings of the present study, the following conclusions can be drawn.

1. Iranian EFL students as one domain of EFL learners showed to be moderate speaking strategies with a close to mean average on using speaking strategies.
2. Students' level of proficiency affected their pattern of strategy use. The more proficient students were higher strategy users. A finding in line with previous research findings.
3. Students' gender did not show any significant difference in their pattern of strategy use. A finding in contrast with most of previous research findings.
4. No interaction effect of gender and proficiency level was observed indicating that the two variables exerted their effects independently.

In sum, the first null hypothesis of the study was rejected showing that level of proficiency had a significant effect on the rate of speaking strategy use; while the second null hypothesis was retained meaning that gender did not affect students' pattern of speaking strategy use.

A pedagogical implication of the findings of the present study would be to give enough attention to the promotion of strategic competence in EFL course design and teaching methodology. Teachers may do their best to create situations in which learners can improve their strategic competence in order to be able to use communication strategies to cope with communicative problems they may encounter in real life situations.

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## **Appendix: Speaking Strategy Questionnaire**

Gender: Female    Male

**Dear student,**

The following are a list of behaviors we might do when speaking to other people in formal and informal situations. For each statement please choose the option that is true of you. Thank you for participating in this study.

### **Part I.**

#### **In informal conversations in English:**

1. While speaking, I pay a lot of attention to the forms (choices of words, expressions, grammar, pronunciation, etc.).

very often-----    often-----    sometimes-----    rarely-----    never-----

2. While speaking, I correct myself whenever I make a mistake.

very often-----    often-----    sometimes-----    rarely-----    never-----

3. While speaking, I correct only the “big” errors and ignore the “slips of the tongue”.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

4. I don't correct errors unless they have already caused misunderstanding in my communication.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

5. I am only interested in getting the message across in the process of speaking to others.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

6. In my speaking, when I can't think of a word, I use gestures to convey my idea.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

7. I coin new words if I do not have the right ones at my disposal when I am speaking.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

8. When speaking, if I can't think of a word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

9. I try to think in English when I am speaking to other people.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

10. I'm not afraid of losing face when I make a mistake in my conversation.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

11. When I am in short of words, I slow down my speech to find appropriate words.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

12. When I am in short of words, I try to change the topic of the conversation.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

13. I use gap fillers (e.g., OK, well, all right, you know, etc.) when I forget a particular word or phrase in order to compensate for the lack of the word or phrase.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

14. I ask for help from English speakers when I talk to them.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

## **Part II.**

### **When preparing for an oral report in class or group:**

15. I organize it in Persian, then put it into English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

16. I write it down in English, then memorize it.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

17. I organize it in English orally, then practice it several times.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

18. I write down an outline in English, then practice it.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

19. I just think of an outline in English, and elaborate it in class.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

## **Part III.**

### **In order to improve my speaking ability in English:**

20. I read newspapers, magazines, books, brochures, or pamphlets primarily in order to learn new words or structures.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

21. I speak English with other students or teachers after class.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

22. I practice reading aloud to improve my pronunciation and intonation.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

23. I repeat the tapes while listening to them.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

24. I listen to radio or tapes primarily to improve my pronunciation and intonation.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

25. I look for chances to speak to native speakers.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

26. When my teacher asks questions in class, I try to answer them mentally and to myself.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

27. I find myself correcting other students' speech mentally and to myself when they make an error.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

28. I speak to myself in English, either silently or aloud.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

29. I find myself repeating words and phrases after my teacher or a native speaker silently to myself while listening.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

30. I memorize dialogs, stories, or other reading materials from my textbook.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

31. I memorize stories, dialogs, or other materials which I read after class.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

32. I look for chances to attend lectures or talks given by native speakers (e.g., visiting scholars) which are not part of my course.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

33. When listening to my teachers, or native speakers, I pay attention to the ways they express themselves (e. g., idiomatic or colloquial expressions), and try to use them in my own speech.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

34. I retell stories or texts after class.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

35. I look for chances to watch films or TV programs in English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

36. I think my participation in pair-work and/or other oral activities in the class is .....

|          |             |                 |               |                 |
|----------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| very---- | active----- | moderately----- | not very----- | not at all----- |
| active   |             | active          | active        | active          |

37. I try to talk like native English speakers.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

38. I start conversations in English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

39. I look for opportunities to speak as much as possible in English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

40. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

41. I have clear goals for improving my speaking ability.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

42. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of speaking English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

43. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

44. I give myself a reward or treat when I speak English well.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

45. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am speaking English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

46. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I speak English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----

47. I ask questions in English.

very often----- often----- sometimes----- rarely----- never-----