EXPLORING STRATEGIES USED BY ALGERIAN EFL LEARNERS TO DEVELOP THEIR SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract: Cognitive theories have transformed the way educators look at the complex journey of language learning by highlighting new dimensions. The investigation of learners' mental processes unveiled capacities and strategies learners bring to classes. Learning strategies are used by learners to enhance their learning. For many learners, speaking the language may be the most concrete and rewarding benefit of language learning. Many of them, however, may struggle with developing EFL speaking skills. One determinant factor in language learning is the use of learning strategies. Therefore, the present research is an attempt to explore the language learning strategies used by Algerian learners to develop their EFL speaking skills according to learner variables (gender, speaking proficiency and educational background). Identifying those strategies could help course designers and teachers design teaching in a way that improves learners' use of learning strategies to develop their speaking skills more efficiently for academic and professional purposes. To achieve this research goal, a mixed quantitative and qualitative research design was implemented. This design rests upon three research tools, a test of speaking proficiency, a learning strategy use questionnaire (N=52) and speaking course syllabi. The data were analysed quantitatively (descriptive statistics) to compare strategy use by each cohort and qualitatively (Thematic analysis). Acknowledging the shortcomings of self-report data and based on descriptive statistics, the main finding of the present study is consistent with many previous studies; students' speaking proficiency, gender and educational background did not seem to correlate with much difference in strategy use. Besides, the syllabi of speaking courses examined made no reference to specific work on speaking strategies. Based on these findings, the first main suggestion is addressed to Algerian researchers about shifting the research agenda from the role of learner variables in strategy use to pedagogy that could improve the efficiency of speaking strategy training. Other suggestions including guidelines to integrate strategy training in the curriculum as well as methods to identify learners' current strategies and foster appropriate strategy use are offered to speaking course designers and teachers in order to enhance Algerian EFL students' strategy use and ultimately develop better speaking skills.

Keywords: EFL; speaking skills; learning strategies; learner variables; syllabus.

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1. Introduction

Learning to speak a foreign language may be one of the most explicit and rewarding goals for many language learners. Efficient learners use certain strategies to increase their learning of and performance in the target language. Many students, however, may struggle to develop EFL speaking ability. Research on EFL learners' speaking strategies is needed to understand how strategy use is fostering or thwarting the development of EFL speaking skills. Thus, the objective of this research is to study the strategies used by students of the English Department at Blida 2 University, Algeria to develop their English speaking ability. According to research (e.g. O'Malley et al., 1985, p. 577), instruction in learning strategies can facilitate learning. It is hoped that the present paper will contribute insights that could help make EFL learning strategy instruction more efficient. The findings may help extend our understanding of the strategies employed by students in an Algerian English department. Speaking teachers might use the findings to enable individual learners to improve their learning and eventually performance in speaking English. After the present introduction, this study is put in its broad theoretical context. The latter is followed by a brief description of the research instruments used to collect descriptive data about Algerian EFL learners' speaking strategies. The results, findings and implications are then discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings – Cognitivism and Learner Strategies

Behaviourist theories of learning dominated education for decades. However, starting from the 1950s, Cognitivist approaches to learning have transformed the way educators look at the complex journey of learning by acknowledging the role of new dimensions. Indeed, Cognitivism is founded on the premise that learners actively construct their knowledge. Instead of considering learning as acquiring behaviours or filling recipients with knowledge, the investigation of learners' mental processes unveiled capacities and strategies learners bring to their learning. Among these are strategies that are used by learners to enhance their learning. The role of strategies in learning has been the subject of a lot of research (Chen, 2007; De Clercq et al., 2013; Figura & Jarvis, 2007, White, 1995). Learner training and strategy training have been described as methods of developing the skills learners need for efficient learning (Wenden, 1991; Dickinson, 1992). In this theoretical framework, I first define the concept of 'learner strategies'. Then, I review a few taxonomies of these strategies, and discuss their importance for language learning and teaching. Finally, the discussion is narrowed down to review strategies used by learners to develop EFL speaking skills.

2.2 Defining Learning Strategies

Research has provided an interesting lead to understanding why some learners are more successful than others. Many researchers (Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; etc.) have explored what better language learners do in order to characterize behaviours that correlate with good academic achievement. This research suggests that effective learners use a number of techniques to enhance their learning and use of a foreign language. The literature on language learning strategies puts forward a number of definitions for the term 'language strategy'. For example, 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" (As cited in Hismanoglu, 2000, p. 1). For Green and Oxford (1995), language learning strategies are "specific actions or techniques that students use, often intentionally, to improve their progress in developing L2 skills" (p. 262). It may be useful to distinguish language learning strategies from language use strategies. In Cohen's terms (1996b), "Whereas language-learning strategies have the explicit goal of assisting learners in improving their knowledge in a target language, language-use strategies focus primarily on

employing the language that learners have in their current interlanguage" (p. 11). In this study, the term 'learner strategy' refers to more or less conscious actions undertaken by EFL learners either for the purpose of enhancing their learning of or the performance in a given skill. It is used to denote a selected course of action that requires certain skill(s) to be carried out. Therefore, learners choose/adopt a strategy and use relevant skills/knowledge to implement it. For instance, to encourage themselves to persist in learning how to speak fluently, learners can choose to use the strategy of positive self-talk. This strategy requires that they possess the skill of talking to oneself positively. They need to know the right words that motivate them, the right time, the right place and tone, etc.

2.3 Characterising Learning Strategies

In the process of describing strategies used by EFL learners, it is useful to outline some of the most cited characterisations of learner strategies. For instance, Oxford (1990) segregates indirect from direct strategies. The latter include memory strategies (like reviewing); cognitive strategies (like practicing), and compensation strategies (like guessing). Indirect strategies, however, consist of metacognitive strategies (like planning), social and affective strategies. Affective strategies consist of lowering one's anxiety, self-motivation, etc. Finally, social strategies include asking questions, cooperating with peers, etc. (Oxford, 1990). As for Stern (1992), learning strategies consist of management and planning strategies (e.g. setting goals), cognitive strategies (e.g. practice), communicative-experiential strategies (gesturing), interpersonal and affective strategies (e.g. awareness of one's emotional problems) (As cited in Hismanoglu, 2000, pp 5-6). For O'Malley et al. (1996), language learning strategies fall into three subcategories: Metacognitive (e.g. self-monitoring), cognitive (e.g. repetition) and socio-affective strategies (e.g. cooperation) (As cited in Hismanoglu 2000, p. 4). It is not within the scope of the present study to assess and compare the different taxonomies of learner strategies proposed in the literature. Nonetheless, as can be noticed, the above characterisations have a lot in common (See for instance the repetition of cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies). Moreover, they all contribute to our understanding of learner strategies. Probably, a combination of these taxonomies could be a useful strategy to design tools for conducting further research on learning strategies.

2.4 Importance of Strategies for Language Learning and Teaching

Efficient learners have been found to use certain strategies to increase their learning of and performance in the target language (e.g. Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). Research has identified strategies used by effective language learners (Green and Oxford, 1995; S. C. Huang, 2001; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford, 1996). The appropriate use of learning strategies can enhance learning. Indeed, they can make learning "quicker, easier, and more effective" (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995, p. 18; Oxford, 1996). Efficient learning requires learners to be willing and able to undertake tasks such as making decisions about one's learning goals and planning one's learning. According to Azevedo and Witherspoon (2009), it requires analysing the learning context in order to find out which learning strategies to use. Being able to choose the strategies that suit each learning task is prerequisite to its successful completion. Besides, being aware of the strategies one is using and adjusting them to the current learning task stands as a clear requirement to enhance learning. In addition, self-monitoring and self-assessment strategies help learners improve their learning. According to Schunk (2012), research has shown positive effects of self-monitoring on achievement. For instance, self-monitoring increased time learners spent on task, self-efficacy, skill, and persistence in learning. Moreover, learners need to be metacognitively aware of the tasks they are undertaking, the choices they are making, etc. in order to manage their learning. Metacognition "results in critical but healthy reflection and evaluation of thinking that may result in making specific changes in how learning is managed,

and in the strategies chosen for this purpose" (Anderson, 2008, p. 99). Appropriate use of learning strategies represents a key factor underlying success of the EFL learning process.

2.5 Strategies Used by Learners to Develop Their EFL Speaking Skills

Many studies have emphasised the importance of the speaking skill for the success of EFL/ESL learners (e.g. Johns, 1981; Meloni and Thompson, 1980; Murphy, 1991; Pierce, 1989). Success in learning English and other languages is often measured by ability to speak the target language. Such success can benefit from the learners' effective use of speaking strategies. It is important here to distinguish two types of speaking strategies; strategies used to develop speaking skills (like watching videos by native speakers to acquire vocabulary, native accents and rules of appropriate use) and strategies to use those skills to speak the language (e.g. using gestures when the necessary vocabulary is not available at the time of speaking).

Research (Alcaya et al., 1994; Cohen, 1996a; Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford, 1986) identified speaking strategies used by effective ESL/EFL learners. These strategies include those identified by Alcaya et al. (1994) 1) activate background knowledge, 2) rehearse, 3) encourage oneself to speak, 4) take time to think before speaking, 5) use the structure or vocabulary other speakers use, 6) imitate the way native speakers talk, 7) switch to a topic for which one knows the words, 8) evaluate how well one spoke, 9) identify problem areas, 10) ask for and give feedback, 11) look up vocabulary and grammar forms one had difficulty with, and 12) ask for help (Alcaya et al., 1994, as cited in Cohen, 1996a, pp 23-26). Cohen et al. (1996) identified some other speaking strategies: They are 1) translate words from one's mother tongue, 2) pay attention to pronunciation, 3) skip words one could not remember, 4) try to use new words / expressions for practice, 5) use idioms or other routines, 6) when cannot remember the correct expression, find a different way to express the idea, 7) give oneself a reward for doing well in one's learning, 8) talk to someone trusted about one's attitudes and feelings concerning learning, and 9) pay attention to grammar (Cohen, et al., 1996, pp 33-45). Finally, according to Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995), the SILL (the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) that was developed by Oxford (1986) includes the following speaking-related strategies: 1) think of relationships between known and new, 2) connect sounds and images, 3) use mental images, 4) use rhyme, 5) physically act out words, 6) say or write words several times, 7) try to talk like native speakers, 8) practice sounds, 9) use words in different ways, 10) start conversations, 11) watch TV/movies, 12) look for similar words across languages, 13) use gestures, 14) make up new words, 15) guess what the speaker will say, 16) use circumlocution or synonym, 17) find ways to use English, 18) notice mistakes, 19) pay attention to speaker, 20) look for conversation partners, 21) relax when fearful, 22) encourage self to speak, 23) ask for slowness or repetition (As cited in Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995, p. 23)

The above taxonomies of EFL speaking strategies, used in combination, can offer a broad characterisation of EFL speaking strategies. However, further research is certainly needed to explore this topic especially in various contexts. Oxford (1996) rightly insisted, "Studies will need to be replicated so that more consistent information becomes available within and across populations. Particularly important is more information on how students from different cultural backgrounds and different countries use language learning strategies" (p. 41). In Algeria, after running searches for studies on strategies used by Algerian EFL learners to develop their speaking skills, none could be found. Mezhoud (2011) focused on strategies to perform in speaking by secondary school learners. Douadi (2019) also focused on the types of speaking strategies used for communication by students of the English Department at the University of Bordj Bou Areridj, Algeria. Benaissa (2018) explored the types of strategies used by students in speaking at the Universities of Boumerdes and Tizi

Ouzou. These studies investigated speaking performance strategies not learning strategies to develop speaking ability. Thus, this study could contribute to filling this gap in the literature. Such research is required especially that many Algerian learners could be struggling to develop functional EFL speaking skills. For instance, Zaghar (2023) found out "students' inability to maintain spontaneous talk" (p. 297). Poor speaking proficiency could be allotted to poor strategy use. For example, Zouaoui (2022) discovered that many students of the English Department at Setif 2 University, Algeria reported poor use of oral communication strategies, which caused poor oral performance (p. 40). When we learn how students use strategies to develop EFL speaking skills, it is possible to help teachers integrate appropriate training to foster strategies that can help learners maximise their speaking skill development.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the present research is to study the strategies used by students of the English Department at Blida 2 University, Algeria to develop their English speaking ability. The findings may help extend our understanding of the strategies employed by Algerian students in English departments. Eventually, the insights gained should help teachers adjust their pedagogy to foster better student use of leaning strategies. More specifically, the aim of this study is to explore the following research questions:

01) What strategies are used by students to develop their English speaking ability?

02) How frequently do they use these strategies?

03) Is there any difference in strategy use between students who are academically classified as good, average and low achievers in speaking English?

04) Is there difference in EFL speaking strategy use between learners of different educational background as reflected in 'literary' versus 'scientific' streams in secondary education?

05) Is there any difference in EFL speaking strategy use between female and male students?

It is not within the scope of this study to identify strategies that are most effective for improving speaking skills.

3.1 Context

Algerian students learn English as a second foreign language starting from grade 8 (second year in the middle school). French is considered the first foreign language and Arabic or Thamazight/Berber are acquired as a mother tongue. To explore the five research questions stated above, primary data collection was conducted in the English Department at the University of Blida 2, Algeria. This particular context was selected for two reasons. First, improving teaching and learning of English should start and focus on university English departments because they must train future teachers of English. The latter must attain advanced levels of English including speaking ability to later train about twelve (12) millions of learners from primary to secondary school (10 433 348 in pre university in 2021-2022, National Bureau of Statistics, 2024) and university (1 467 941, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2024); 2. The researcher is a lecturer at this department, which made the participant students better accessible for data collection.

3.2 Participants

The population investigated by the present study is first year students reading for the English Degree in the English Department at the University of Blida 2, Algeria. Two randomly selected groups of first year students were invited to respond to the strategy use questionnaire. First year students are appropriate to enrol in the present study in order to identify as early as possible the learning strategies they are using and hence make the

necessary interventions to maximise strategy use for better learning. Fifty-two questionnaires were completed by those who chose to participate and returned to the researcher. The participants' marks in semester one speaking course exam were used to discriminate between high, average and low achievers in EFL speaking. In Algerian universities, exams are marked out of 20 where 10/20 is considered the average mark. Of the fifty-two participants, fifteen (29 %) scored 08/20 and lower, twenty-nine (56 %) were placed as average achievers in speaking English (scoring between 08.5 – 11.5/20) and eight (15 %) scored 12/20 and higher. As for gender, forty-one (79%) participants were female students and eleven (21%) males, which is similar to the ratio of female to male students in all the classes for decades in the English Department at the University of Blida 2. Nearly all the subjects were aged between 18 and 24 years. In addition, all the participants reported Algerian Arabic as their mother tongue except for two whose mother tongue is Thamazight (Berber). In the light of theses biographical data, the sample of participant students seems quite homogenous.

3.3 Procedures

3.3.1 English Speaking Exam

For the purpose of classifying participants into three cohorts: high, average and low speaking ability in order to inform research question 03, the speaking paper of the First Certificate of English was planned to be used. It was planned to be administered to two regular groups of students (N>100). Arrangements were made for the administration of the test as the regular exam of the speaking module. Unfortunately, the instructor of speaking had to change the schedule and the test could not be carried out as planned. Therefore, the researcher resorted to using the marks obtained by the subjects in the regular oral exam. The latter was conducted by the teacher of the module. Using regular exams comes with benefits. Grades obtained by students in their regular courses reasonably guarantee that they did their best to demonstrate their abilities compared to voluntary participation in tests for research that has no effect on their scores and promotion/graduation. Hence, they should reflect better their level of achievement and thus offer better validity of the data. The teacher conducted interviews with the students individually. Each student was asked to draw a slip of paper from a stack prepared by the teacher and spoke about the subject that is mentioned on it. The duration of the interview lasted around 10 to 15 minutes. The topics included friendship, smuggling, etc. The teacher allotted scores holistically, which, it should be acknowledged, may not match the accuracy of rubric-based assessment.

3.3.2 EFL Speaking Strategy Use Questionnaire

In order to collect data about the speaking strategies used by students, a questionnaire was designed in English (See Appendix). Oxford (1996) rightly observed, "Questionnaires are among the most efficient and comprehensive ways to assess frequency of language learning strategy use" (p. 28). Indeed, "Despite frequent criticism...verbal report has gained popularity in the last several decades because it provides data on cognitive processes and learner responses that otherwise would have to be investigated only indirectly" (Cohen, 1996b, p. 13). The questionnaire consists of thirty (30) closed-ended items (e.g. "I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always make lists of expressions, words to learn.") and one (01) open-ended item ("Are there other techniques you use to learn to speak English? Please add as many as you want on the back of this questionnaire"). The questionnaire strategies were selected from the strategies identified by research reviewed in the present study. The basis of the selection is the items' clear relevance to language-learning strategies used by learners to develop their speaking skills as opposed to language-use strategies that are used to enhance speaking performance (See Section 2.1 above). Following Oxford's (1990) characterization of learning strategies, the questionnaire speaking strategies fall in two categories fifteen (15)

direct strategies, consisting of memory (02 items), cognitive (08 items), and compensation (05 items) strategies; and fifteen (15) indirect strategies: made up of metacognitive (10 items), affective (02 items) and social (03 items) strategies. The biographical information collected about the respondents consists of age, gender and baccalaureate stream (sciences or literature).

3.3.3 Speaking Course Syllabi

Course descriptions, syllabi or course outlines are written by teachers generally collaboratively. They are expected to state explicitly their teaching and learning goals, describe the procedure (materials, teaching and assessment strategies) they plan to use in order to achieve those goals as well as the detailed contents or units of the course. The agendas teachers may hold about learner strategies will probably be reflected in the details of their course descriptions. Therefore, the present research includes analysis of the contents of the description of two speaking courses for 1st and 2nd year classes in the English Department at Blida 2 University, Algeria.

3.3.4 Procedure of Data Collection

Data collection was conducted according to the following procedure. First, the marks of the participant students on the speaking course regular exam were collected from their teacher of the speaking course. Based on these marks, they were classified as either low performers (15 of 52 participants, 29 % scored 08/20 and lower), average performers (29/52, 56 % scored between 08.5 – 11.5/20) or high performers (8/52, 15 %) scored 12/20. The cut-off marks are neither meant nor expected to be set in stone. They reasonably reflect a broad assessment in terms of low, average and high achievement. Then, the strategy use questionnaire was administered to the students in a lecture hall in May 2013. More than 100 questionnaires were handed out. Directions about how to complete the questionnaire were given to the respondents. No issues were recorded in the process of the questionnaire administration.

3.3.5 Data Treatment

The questionnaire data were entered in a Microsoft Excel sheet for analysis and synthesis. For quantification, a numerical value was assigned to each response category: frequency of learner strategy use 'Never' is allotted a value of 0, 'rarely'= 1, 'sometimes'= 2, 'often'= 3 and 'always'= 4. This operation allows the calculation of the mean frequency of use for each strategy. It is also used to describe frequency as follows: Frequency of strategy use ranging from 0 to 1.3/4 is considered as 'Low'; while frequencies between 1.4 and 2.7/4 are considered 'Medium' and those falling between 2.8 and 4/4 are 'High'. The primary analysis of the questionnaire data consisted of aggregating data for each category of respondents along the variables examined (Gender, educational background and achievement in the speaking exam). Average frequency of use was calculated for each of the thirty strategies and the six categories of strategies (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social). Standard deviation for all data sets was also calculated to measure dispersion of the data around the means. These statistics describe the distribution and range of responses for each category of respondents (male vs. female, sciences background vs. literary, etc.) and enable comparison between the variables. The results are reported in the tables below to compare between the different cohorts of participants. Finally, content analysis was used to treat the two speaking courses' outlines using a mixed-method, i.e. qualitative and quantitative. It consisted of the following stages. The first stage consisted of examining the course description. The researcher took notes of all the themes relevant to learning strategies. The codes used in this analysis relate to the six categories of strategies (e.g. 'metacognitive', 'social', etc.) and planned treatment ('lip-service for strategy training', 'strategy training', and 'strategy assessment'). In the second stage, quantitative analysis was used to tally how frequently each theme appeared in the data. The objectivity of this procedure was made

possible thanks to its simplicity; i.e. the researcher searched for references to speaking strategies and how they were pedagogically treated and tallied the number of those references.

4. Results

4.1 Limitations

Before we delve into discussing the results and key findings, it is important to acknowledge a few limitations to the present study. Many limitations were kindly highlighted by the reviewers. I have tried to address some of those but not all unfortunately. Thus, I shall acknowledge them here. The main limitations concern the possible challenges posed by self-report data. Despite the usefulness of questionnaires, the accuracy of the participant students' answers should not be taken for granted. There may be some inaccurate answers due to some participant students' lack of concentration while completing the questionnaire or inability to recollect relevant learning experiences. In addition, the present study does not claim any control of other factors that can exert an effect on strategy use like learner motivation and social background. As for the speaking proficiency test, the use of one rater may reduce inter-rater issues; but the use of holistic assessment that was not controlled by the researcher should indeed be considered with care in terms of reliability. Moreover, the strategy use questionnaire was not tested for internal consistency; it was adapted from previous questionnaires (Alcaya et al., 1994; Cohen, et al., 1996; Oxford, 1986) that received those treatments though. Finally, the present study does not claim triangulation as the three research tools used serve different complementary purposes. Such limitations should inspire carefulness about the interpretation and exclude any generalisation of the results. With these limitations in mind, below are presented and discussed the findings of this study. These findings are structured around the research questions stated above.

4.2 Strategies Used by the Students to Develop Their English Speaking Ability

Table 1 below presents the aggregated questionnaire data for the whole cohort of the participants in the present study. Concerning the six categories of strategies (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social strategies), our participants seem to use affective strategies (like encourage myself to try to speak) more frequently (M=3.09, SD=0.75) followed by metacognitive strategies (e.g. try to learn English while watching TV/videos) (Mean=2.87, SD=0.51). According to the data, memory strategies (like revise words and grammar) and social strategies (e.g. discuss learning with classmates and teachers) are the least frequently used by learners (M=2.21, SD=0.11) and (M=2.23, SD=0.04) respectively. Indirect strategies (affective, metacognitive and social) (M=2.77, SD=0.54) seem to be used a little more frequently than direct ones (cognitive, compensation and memory) (M=2.41, SD=0.46). In terms of individual strategies, the most frequently used are "I correct myself when I notice that I made a mistake" (M=3.64; 4=always), "I encourage myself to try to speak" (M=3.63), and "I try to learn from my mistakes" (M=3.58). However, the least frequently used strategies are "I try to use English idioms" (M=1.83; 2=sometimes), "I practice asking speakers to slow down or repeat" (M=2.06), and "I make lists of expressions, words to learn" (M=2.14). It is noteworthy here to mention that, in response to the open-ended item of the questionnaire, the participant students did not add any speaking strategy that was not included among the thirty strategies.

Table 1:

EFL Speaking Strategies Used by the Subjects (N=52)

Speaking Strategies 0 = Never --- 4 = always	Number of Strategies	Mean frequency of strategy use / 4	Standard Deviation	Rank by frequency of strategy use
Cognitive Strategies	8	2.46	0.55	3
Compensation Strategies	5	2.41	0.42	4
Memory Strategies	2	2.21	0.11	6
Total of Direct Strategies	15	2.41	0.46	
Affective Strategies	2	3.09	0.75	1
Metacognitive Strategies	10	2.87	0.51	2
Social Strategies	3	2.23	0.04	5
Total of Indirect Strategies	15	2.77	0.54	
Total Strategies	30	2.59	0.53	

4.3 EFL Students' Speaking Strategy Use by Level of Academic Achievement

In order to investigate possible differences in strategy use by students at different levels of achievement in EFL speaking, the questionnaire responses were averaged for the three cohorts: low, average and high achievers for each of the six categories of strategies (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social). With slight differences between them, the three levels of proficiency reported using indirect strategies more than direct ones (See Table 2 below). Affective strategies (like "I practice relaxing when I feel anxious") and metacognitive strategies (e.g. "I try to learn from my mistakes") are used at the highest frequencies irrespective of achievement level. In terms of individual strategies, the following are the least and most frequently used strategies by level: Low-achievers, "I try to use idioms" M=1.78; (2=sometimes); "I try to learn from my mistakes." M=3.27; average-achievers, "I pay attention to pronunciation to pronounce better" M=1.68, "I practice asking speakers to slow down or repeat." M=3.67; high-achievers, "I try to use English idioms." M=1.63, "I encourage myself to try to speak." M=3.53. Indeed, differences in strategy use slightly appeared in individual strategies. The frequency of use of some strategies clearly appeared to increase with achievement level (e.g. Practice anticipating what the speaker is going to say based on the context, 1.94, 2.15, 2.88/4; and asking someone to help me improve my speaking, 2, 2.17, 3).

Table 2:

EFL Speaking Strategy Use across Speaking Achievement Levels (N=52)

Strategy Use Across Speaking Achievement Levels (low, average and high)	N	Average Frequency of Strategy Use / 4 and SD (Standard Deviation) 0 = Never --- 4 = always								Rank by frequency of strategy use			
	N	Total N:52	SD	Low N:15	SD	Ave N:29	SD	High N:8	SD	Total	Low	Ave	High
Direct Strategies	15	2.41	0.46	2.42	0.49	2.41	0.55	2.43	0.50				
Cognitive Strategies	8	2.46	0.55	2.34	0.55	2.54	0.64	2.38	0.59	3	4	3	5
Compensation Strategies	5	2.41	0.42	2.61	0.47	2.25	0.52	2.60	0.34	4	3	4	4
Memory Strategies	2	2.21	0.11	2.17	0.16	2.25	0.05	2.13	0.56	6	5	4	6
Indirect Strategies	15	2.77	0.54	2.77	0.62	2.76	0.57	2.81	0.57				
Affective Strategies	2	3.09	0.75	2.93	0.97	3.23	0.58	2.87	0.93	1	2	1	1
Metacognitive Strategies	10	2.87	0.51	2.97	0.49	2.83	0.57	2.85	0.61	2	1	2	2
Social Strategies	3	2.23	0.04	1.98	0.04	2.25	0.12	2.63	0.33	5	6	4	3
Total	30	2.59	0.53	2.60	0.58	2.59	0.58	2.62	0.56				

4.4 EFL Students' Speaking Strategy Use by Educational Background

Questionnaire responses were also amalgamated to allow a comparison of EFL speaking strategy use between two cohorts of students: 1- students who had a 'literary' secondary education and those who had a 'scientific' one. The classification of the participant students according to educational background was based on the baccalaureate stream (Secondary school certificate major) as reported by the questionnaire respondents. 'Literary' educational background includes classes of learners who had foreign languages, human sciences or philosophy as majors in the secondary schools; whereas 'scientific' streams include learners whose majors were maths, natural sciences and accountancy. As shown in Table 3 below, the statistics appear to point out to a slight difference between cohorts. In other words, direct strategies (e.g. "I practice using new words/expressions to learn them")

seem to be a little more frequently used by the scientific cohort (M=2.47 vs. M=2.41). However, the literary cohort reported using indirect strategies like "I evaluate how I spoke" slightly more (M=2.77, vs. M=2.62). In terms of individual strategies, the following are the least and most frequently used strategies by educational background: students with a 'scientific' educational background, "I try to use English idioms", M=1.33; 1=rarely; "I pay attention to pronunciation to pronounce better", M=4; students with a 'literary' educational background, "I try to use English idioms", M=2, "I try to learn from my mistakes", M=3.69. Regardless of educational background, both 'scientific' and 'literary' said they use affective strategies the most (M=3.33 and 3.04 respectively). Both cohorts also reported using memory strategies the least frequently (M=1.75, 2.21 respectively). Otherwise, for the five categories of strategies, the data seem to show little correlation between educational background and learning strategy use. Nonetheless, any conclusions must be made with extra care here as the number of participant students who reported scientific background (03) is too small in comparison to the literary counterparts (49).

Table 3:

EFL Speaking Strategy Use by Educational Background of Learners (N=52)

EFL Speaking Strategy Use by Educational Background of Learners	N	Average Frequency of Strategy Use / 4 and SD (Standard Deviation) 0 = Never --- 4 = always						Rank by frequency of strategy use		
		Sciences N = 3	SD	Literature N = 49	SD	Total	SD	Sciences	Literature	Total
Direct Strategies	15	2.47	0.82	2.41	0.41	2.41	0.46			
Cognitive Strategies	8	2.58	0.92	2.44	0.48	2.46	0.55	3	3	3
Compensation Strategies	5	2.47	0.80	2.43	0.42	2.41	0.42	4	4	4
Memory Strategies	2	1.75	0.24	2.21	0.15	2.21	0.11	6	6	6
Indirect Strategies	15	2.62	0.64	2.77	0.55	2.77	0.54			
Affective Strategies	2	3.33	0.47	3.04	0.75	3.09	0.75	1	1	1
Metacognitive Strategies	10	2.70	0.55	2.88	0.53	2.87	0.51	2	2	2
Social Strategies	3	1.89	0.19	2.24	0.03	2.23	0.04	5	5	5
Total	30	2.55	0.73	2.59	0.51	2.59	0.53			

4.5 EFL Students' Speaking Strategy Use by Gender

For the purpose of investigating differences in speaking strategy use according to gender, the questionnaire responses were amalgamated to compare mean frequency use of male and female participants for the six categories of strategies (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social strategies). The data collected show that both female and male cohorts use slightly more frequently indirect strategies (M=2.77) (e.g. "I pay attention to similarities and differences between English and my 1st language.") than direct ones (M=2.41) (e.g. "I make lists of expressions / words to learn.") (See below Table 4). Besides, gender does not seem to affect the order of the six categories in terms of frequency of use. According to the responses of both female and male cohorts, affective and metacognitive strategies are the most frequently used. However, female participants reported slightly higher use of strategies in general than their male counterparts did (M=2.65 vs. 2.39). The difference between the two cohorts is clearer in the use of memory strategies (M=2.34 vs. 1.65) and metacognitive strategies (M=3.00 vs. 2.58). Nonetheless, if we consider the investigated strategies individually, the participant students reported the following: the most frequently used strategy is the same; i.e. "I pay attention to pronunciation to pronounce better". Similarly, the strategy used the least is "I try to use English idioms" for both female students.

Table 4:

Speaking Strategy Use by Female and Male EFL Learners (N=52)

EFL Speaking Strategy Use by Gender of Learners	N	Average Frequency of Strategy Use / 4 and SD (Standard Deviation) 0 = Never --- 4 = always						Rank by frequency of strategy use		
		Female N=41	SD	Male N=11	SD	Total	SD	Female	Male	Total
Direct Strategies	15	2.48	0.43	2.20	0.58	2.41	0.46			
Cognitive Strategies	8	2.49	0.51	2.30	0.60	2.46	0.55	4	4	3
Compensation Strategies	5	2.52	0.40	2.25	0.62	2.41	0.42	3	5	4
Memory Strategies	2	2.34	0.16	1.65	0.16	2.21	0.11	5	6	6
Indirect Strategies	15	2.82	0.57	2.58	0.54	2.77	0.54			
Affective Strategies	2	3.09	0.75	2.95	0.71	3.09	0.75	1	1	1
Metacognitive Strategies	10	3.00	0.52	2.58	0.57	2.87	0.51	2	2	2
Social Strategies	3	2.19	0.03	2.33	0.29	2.23	0.04	6	3	5
Total	30	2.65	0.52	2.39	0.59	2.59	0.53			

5. Discussion

The findings of this study can be summarised as follows:

1) The subjects report a high medium use of strategies across categories (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social strategies). For the total cohort of subjects, frequency of use of the six categories of strategies ranges from M=2.21/4 (memory strategies) to M= 3.09/4 (affective strategies). Although some studies found that they are the least used (Fradejas and Maharjan, 2005; Yılmaz, 2010), our study consistently found that affective strategies were the most frequently used by all cohorts. Boulkraa's study (2016) on students of Constantine's Teachers' School in Algeria found that one of these strategies; namely, positive self-talk, appeared to be very, efficacious in fostering students' oral achievement (p. 78). In another Algerian context, Mezhoud (2011) found that encouraging oneself to (learn to) speak was used by very few secondary school pupils (p. 137). In contrast, our participant students reported using this strategy very frequently by all cohorts along the three parameters discussed above. One explanation could be that with the increase of English proficiency (from secondary to university) and cognitive maturity, learners might grow more autonomous and hence use self-motivation more frequently.

2) Almost all the cohorts of participants seem to use metacognitive strategies the second most and memory strategies and social strategies the least. Studies found similar results about metacognitive strategies (Ait Abdeslam and Bensafi, 2022; Ghee et al., 2010; O'Malley et al., 1985).

3) It is worth noting that female subjects reported higher use of strategies especially memory and metacognitive strategies than their male peers. This study is similar to other studies in this respect (Green and Oxford, 1995; Yılmaz, 2010).

4) Most of the data indicate that the parameters studied in the present research (speaking performance level, gender and educational background) did not seem to correlate with much difference in strategy use. Similarly, proficiency level did not seem to clearly affect strategy use in Ghee et al. (2010) and Yılmaz (2010). Nonetheless, Nakatani's (2006) findings indicate that high oral proficiency students seem to use specific strategies, such as social affective strategies. Likewise, a study done at the Department of English in Annaba University, Algeria, found that proficiency level has significant relationship with students' use of communication strategies (Hamlaoui and Haddouche, 2013). Concerning gender, Benaissa (2018) found no significant differences between male and female students in terms of their overall use of learning strategies. However, other studies found a gender effect (Amari, 2023 in Djillali Liabes University, and Hamlaoui and Haddouche, 2013 in Annaba University). In the present study, only a few clear differences in strategy use appeared between male and female participants. For instance, in the above mentioned most and least used strategies, although they are the same for both cohorts, in terms of comparative frequency, females appear to pay more attention to form "I pay attention to pronunciation to pronounce better" (males M=2.82 and females M=3.44). In addition, although the strategy "I try to use English idioms" is the least used by both cohorts, female students seem to care more about rich language and culture (M=2.09) than males (M=1.44). Nonetheless, other studies (Benaissa, 2018; Ehrman and Oxford, 1990; Fradejas and Maharjan, 2005; Ghee et al., 2010; Koosha et al., 2011), did not find gender as a determining factor in strategy use.

5) The syllabi of two speaking courses (1st and 2nd year) (covering four semesters) did make explicit provisions for learner strategy training. This finding is quite exceptional as, on a broader scale and in the same department, Missoum (2021) found, after analysing the syllabi of twenty-three (23) courses, very scarce references to leaning strategies. Only 6/23 syllabi planned for collaborative learning; 2/23 syllabi provided for self-study and practice tasks;

1/23 syllabus provided for developing self-management; and only 2/23 syllabi provided for peer-assessment and self-assessment opportunities. The two syllabi of speaking courses for 1st and 2nd year state as a key course objective the development of strategies but without any reference to specific categories of strategies or individual speaking strategies. One syllabus read, "The teacher selects a number of strategies to practice with every lesson. Each feature should be covered at least twice to work towards automaticity and fluency of strategy use." Apart from this general statement, nothing is mentioned about teaching and assessment of strategy use. The two syllabi were structured around language functions (e.g. Giving information and instructions, Getting and giving opinions, etc.).

6. Implications

The findings of the present study may confirm findings generated by other studies about the inconclusiveness of research on differences in strategy use along learner variables; namely, gender, proficiency and educational background. Thus, EFL researchers, course designers and teachers should probably not worry much about such line of research. This section outlines a few implications related to integrating strategy training in curricula, simple procedures for teachers to identify current learners' strategies as well as guidelines and economical strategies for teachers to foster appropriate strategy use.

6.1 Integrating Strategy Training into the Curriculum

Learning strategy training should be integrated in the curriculum especially of speaking courses. "It is critical that learning strategies be considered when planning courses, teaching students...to enhance student learning" (Oxford, 1996, p. 41; also Nakatani, 2006). The participants in the present study reported a high medium use of strategies across the categories (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social strategies). Still, no category of strategies is used at high frequency. There may still be room for instructional intervention to enable EFL learners to use effective strategies more frequently. Incorporating strategy training is thought to enhance the learners' oral performance (Zouaoui, 2022). Moreover, research indicates that learning strategies can be taught (S. C. Huang, 2001; Teng, 2012). For instance, S. C. Huang (2001) found that the learners who participated in an experimental group used strategies more frequently after training. So did O'Malley et al. (1985) using an experimental design too. Thus, curricula should explicitly make learner training the most important curricular component. Curricula will promote learner strategies if they provide opportunities for learners to be introduced to, reflect on and practice them.

Learning strategy training should "offer learners sufficient practice and reflection opportunities" (Missoum, 2021, p. 59). It requires sufficient time for practice to get familiar with new learning strategies (S. C. Huang, 2001 and O'Malley, 1987, as cited by S. C. Huang, 2001). Practice and recycling of strategies are more efficient when they span long periods. They should be spread over several years rather than be delivered in a number of lessons in order to allow sufficient practice and reflection opportunities. In addition, instruction must culminate in the integration of the target strategies in authentic learning situations.

Both qualitatively and quantitatively, the syllabi of the current speaking courses did not seem to make sufficiently detailed and comprehensive provisions for adequate learner strategy training. On a broader scale and in the same department, Missoum (2021) found out, after analysing the syllabi of twenty-three courses that only 6/23 syllabi planned for collaborative learning, which correlates with the questionnaire findings that social strategies are the second least used category of strategies. Instruction should use available opportunities to develop these strategies in learners for academic, professional and social benefits. Even where left with little curricular guidance, teachers should adjust the speaking syllabus to integrate strategy training taking into account their learners' current strategies.

6.2 How Teachers Can Identify Learners' Strategies

Strategy training should start by identifying current strategies used by the learners**.** Teachers can use a questionnaire like the one appended here to collect data about the strategies used by their current learners. These insights can easily be supplemented by observations teachers can make during speaking activities. They can observe what the learners are doing. They can also occasionally ask learners a few questions that can yield qualitative data that the questionnaire may have missed or confirm questionnaire data. The questions could be "what do you do to improve your English pronunciation?", "What do you do if you feel disappointed at your progress in learning to speak English?" etc. The strategy use questionnaire, teacher classroom observation and interaction with learners represent easy to use and economical procedures that should help teachers identify their learners' strategies.

6.3 How Teachers Can Foster Learners' Appropriate Strategy Use

Training activities should aim at making learners conscious of their learning strategies, reflect on them and work to improve those strategies. As Schunk (2012) put it, good strategy instruction involves introducing a few strategies at a time, providing multiple opportunities for practice, modelling strategy use, stressing the value of strategy use to students, giving feedback, and encouraging student reflection about the strategies. Needs analysis is needed to inform teachers about the learners' current speaking strategies. Students might not always be aware of the learning strategies they are using (L-S. Huang, 2006). Scarce use of some apparently effective strategies and frequent use of apparently ineffective strategies have been identified by a previous study in the same context of the present study (Missoum, 2007). Teaching should encourage students to keep using good strategies (like "I try to learn from my mistakes") and try to use more the least used strategies (like "I try to use English idioms" and "I practice asking speakers to slow down or repeat"). L-S. Huang (2006) experimentally found that strategy awareness-raising session enhanced awareness about strategy use, which in turn enhanced their language learning. The strategy use questionnaire itself may be used to raise students' awareness about strategies. Students should be made aware of the different learning strategies available to them (Cohen et al., 1996; Green and Oxford, 1995). These strategies need to be discussed with learners (Cohen et al., 1996). Discussion should start with explaining briefly those strategies and their potential benefits for the learners. Then, teachers should seize and create opportunities to practice those strategies.

Teachers should use economical strategies to offer learners' strategy training. For instance, to foster learners' reflection about their speaking strategies, they can ask a few questions before, during and after a learning task. Kayashima and Inaba (n.d., 7) proposed the following questions: "What are you doing? Why are you doing it? How does it help you?" Such questions induce learners to monitor their cognitive activity and check it against their learning goals. In addition, evaluation sheets can be used to help students plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Thanasoulas, 2000). For another simple strategy for self-monitoring and self-assessment, learners can record themselves to find out what strategies they are using. Teachers should also provide appropriate scaffolding in strategy training in order to support learners who may be facing difficulties. In addition, learners need to be encouraged to choose the strategies that work for them (Cohen et al., 1996) because not all strategies work in all cultures and for all kinds of learning styles (Oxford, 1996). Teaching should enable learners to experiment with appropriate strategies to make learning more effective (L-S. Huang, 2006). If teachers are to play a role in developing efficient learner strategies, they also need to explore their own teaching strategies. Paris and Winograd (2001, p. 9) argue that teachers "need to become (...) models of effective strategies". These requirements seem accessible to teachers and hence should be easily reflected in their teaching.

6.4 Further Research

The findings of the present study may confirm the finding generated by other studies about the inconclusiveness of research on differences in strategy use along learner variables. Thus, the main implication is that the research agenda may probably better shift from focus on the impact of learner differences on strategy use to effective learning strategy training. Second, instead of quantitative studies, research on learning strategies should start by a qualitative investigation of strategies actually used by learners through questions about how they complete learning tasks, overcome issues, etc. When possible, direct probes like observation, videotaping and think-aloud procedures should be integrated into the research design in order to collect more valid data about the strategies learners actually use. Nakatani rightly insists, "It is important to assess carefully their strategy use in actual learning events" (2006, p. 161). Qualitative data may allow uncovering strategies not accounted for in the standard questionnaires of strategy use like the SILL. Then, from qualitative data, strategies will be extracted to design quantitative strategy use questionnaires.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the present research is to study the strategies used by students of the English Department at Blida 2 University, Algeria to develop their English speaking ability by gender, speaking proficiency, and educational background. A random sample of fifty-two first year students were assessed for ability in EFL speaking and placed in three categories: Low, average and high achievers. Then, they completed a questionnaire to report on how often they use each of thirty speaking strategies. Finally, this study included analysis of the contents of speaking courses syllabi. Average frequency of use and standard deviation were calculated for each of the thirty strategies and the six categories of strategies (cognitive, compensation, memory, affective, metacognitive and social).

A few limitations must be acknowledged in this research (shortcomings of self-report data, lack of control of other factors in strategy use, holistic assessment of the speaking test). The key findings of this study are: 1) The participants report a high medium use of strategies across categories. 2) Similarly to many studies, most of the data indicate that the parameters studied in the present research (speaking performance level, gender and educational background) did not seem to correlate with much difference in strategy use. 3) Speaking course syllabi state the development of strategies as a key course objective but without any reference to specific work in terms of teaching and assessment on individual speaking strategies.

Concerning implications, first, curricula should explicitly make learner training the most important curricular component. If left with little curricular guidance, teachers should adjust the speaking syllabus to integrate strategy training. Second, strategy training should start by identifying current strategies used by the learners using a questionnaire as the one appended here, observation, questioning and think aloud protocols. Third, teachers should try to integrate simple teaching strategies to foster efficient use of appropriate learning strategies. Training activities should make learners conscious of their learning strategies, work to improve their strategies, providing multiple opportunities for practice. Teachers may use a questionnaire like the one appended here to raise their learners' awareness about the learning strategies they are using. They can use economical strategies to offer learners' strategy training like questioning or self-recording to foster self-monitoring and self-assessment of strategies for instance. Finally, as the findings proved inconclusive in many studies, the research agenda should better shift from focus on the impact of learner differences on strategy use to effective learning strategy training, using direct probes like observation, videotaping and think-aloud procedures before using quantitative questionnaires to collect more valid data

about the strategies learners actually use. Research on learner strategies must contribute to training learners who can learn efficiently, attain the highest levels of achievement and experience higher levels of academic success.

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Appendix: Questionnaire – Learners' Reported Speaking Strategy Use

Dear Student, if you have time and wish to contribute to research, we invite you to complete this questionnaire. We hope that your answers will help us make suggestions to improve the quality of learning in the English department. Thank you!

Please put √ next to the right answer about you

Age: 18-23 …   24-30 …   31-40 …   41-50 …

Baccalaureate: Maths and Sciences:… Languages and Literature:… Technical:... or ……..…

Please circle one adverb: Never. Rarely, sometimes, often, or always

01	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice using new words/expressions to learn them.
02	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always try to talk like native speakers.
03	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always try to learn English while watching TV/videos.
04	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice asking speakers to slow down or repeat.
05	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice speaking English with others.
06	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always try to learn about the culture of English.
07	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always pay attention to pronunciation to pronounce better.
08	When I can't remember a word. I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always replace it by another
09	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always try to use English idioms.
10	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always try to learn from my mistakes.
11	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always encourage myself to try to speak.
12	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always consciously think and apply grammar rules.
13	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always evaluate how I spoke.
14	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always discuss learning with classmates and teachers.
15	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always revise words and grammar forms that I had difficulty remembering.
16	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always ask someone to help me improve my speaking.
17	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice guessing the speaker's meaning based on what he/she has said so far.
18	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice anticipating what the speaker is going to say based on the context.
19	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice relaxing when I feel anxious.
20	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice ways to check whether the listener understood what I said.
21	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice ways to paraphrase what I said.
22	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always correct myself when I notice that I made a mistake.
23	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice asking speakers to clarify what they said.

24	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice how to tell I haven't understood.
25	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always practice catching the speaker's main point.
26	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always make lists of expressions, words to learn.
27	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always think about what to learn to improve my speaking.
28	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always pay attention to similarities and differences between English and my 1st language.
29	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always think of what I want to say in my 1st language and then put it in English.
30	I never - rarely – sometimes – often - always make a mental outline of the main points before I speak.

Are there other techniques you use to learn to speak English? Please add as many as you want on the back of this questionnaire. Thank you