

EFL Learners' Speaking Strategies: A Study of Low and High Proficiency Learners¹

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Abstract

Although the ability to speak is often considered a determining factor of learners ability in the target language, research has given scant attention to strategies that can be used to improve this skill. This study aimed to shed light on the speaking strategies that learners use to deal with problems they encounter when using the target language or to improve the quality of their L2 performance. This study deployed the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) developed by Nakatani (2006) to measure the strategies that students use in oral communications. In doing so, adopting the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, this study investigated the use of speaking strategies of low and high proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in performing speaking tasks. The participants of the study were 23 low and 25 high proficiency students learning English in an institute in Iran. After performing the speaking tasks, the participants filled out the OCSI questionnaire and answered two open-ended questions. The results indicated that low and high proficiency students employ different strategies. While advanced learners used *accuracy-oriented* strategies the most and *message abandonment* strategies the least, *message reduction* strategies and *thinking in English* strategies, respectively, were found to be the most and the least frequently used by elementary learners. The Mann-Whitney U test indicated that of the six speaking strategies, only *message abandonment* and *thinking in English* strategies were found to be significantly different between elementary and advanced English learners. This study contributes in some ways to the understanding of how students' proficiency level relates to their strategy use and provides English teachers with a variety of pedagogical methods to motivate students and enhance their oral production via speaking strategies.

Resumen

Aunque la capacidad de hablar a menudo se considera un factor determinante de la capacidad de los estudiantes en el idioma objeto de estudio, no existen suficientes investigaciones sobre las estrategias que se pueden utilizar para mejorar esta habilidad. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo arrojar luz sobre las estrategias de habla que los estudiantes utilizan para lidiar con los problemas que encuentran al usar la lengua objeto o para mejorar la calidad de su rendimiento en ella. Se aplicó el cuestionario Inventario de Estrategias de Comunicación Oral (OCSI) desarrollado por Nakatani (2006) para medir las estrategias que los estudiantes utilizan en las comunicaciones orales. Al hacerlo, este estudio investigó las estrategias de habla que utilizan los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera de bajo y alto dominio. Participaron 23 estudiantes de bajo y 25 de alto dominio que aprendieron inglés en uno de los institutos de Irán. Después de realizar las tareas orales, los participantes llenaron el cuestionario OCSI y respondieron a dos preguntas abiertas. Los resultados indicaron que los estudiantes de bajo y alto dominio emplean diferentes estrategias. Mientras que los estudiantes avanzados utilizaron mayormente *estrategias orientadas a la precisión* y, en menor proporción, *estrategias de abandono de mensajes*, las *estrategias de reducción de mensajes* y la *estrategia de pensar en inglés* fueron utilizados con mayor y menor frecuencia, respectivamente, por los estudiantes básicos. La prueba Mann-Whitney U indicó que de las seis estrategias utilizadas, sólo se encontró que *el abandono de mensajes* y la *estrategia de pensar en inglés* eran significativamente diferentes entre los estudiantes de inglés elementales y avanzados. Este estudio contribuye de alguna manera a la comprensión de cómo el nivel de competencia de los estudiantes se relaciona con su uso de las estrategias y proporciona a los profesores de inglés una variedad de métodos pedagógicos para motivar a los estudiantes y mejorar su producción oral a través de estrategias de habla.

Introduction

Speaking has been considered one of the most important English language skills (Chiu, 2015; Efrizal, 2012; Zhang, 2009). The widespread use of English to sustain international communication as well as to achieve career and academic objectives has made the teaching of oral skills the focal point in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings (Mede et al., 2019). As Koşar and Bedir (2014) observed, language learning requires paying attention to learners' speaking skills to help them improve communication effectively. Regarding this, Graham (2007) states that to most learners the chief aim of learning English is how to be able to maintain the flow of conversation orally. This is important as Domagała-Zyśk and Podlowska (2019) put forth, "Clear, articulate, coherent communication skills in national and foreign languages allow

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individuals who have managed to master them to more effectively negotiate the world in which they live" (p. 1).

English speaking could be regarded as the most challenging to master of the four language skills (Bueno et al., 2006 ; Tsipalakes & Keramida, 2009; Wang, 2014). In Brown's (1994) study, those challenges include elision and vowel reductions, rhythm and intonation, and the utilization of slang and idioms. Furthermore, speaking is often considered to be the most anxiety provoking language skill (Gebhard, 2000; Sila, 2010; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012) since it requires the learners to cope with different concurrent demands such as "monitoring, forming accurate sentences, and being fluent and intelligible" (Mede et al., 2019, p. 1). Palmer and Christison (2018) also emphasized the complexity of communicative competence in a second or foreign language due to lack of the linguistic resources that learners need to be successful in their communicative interactions. In this regard, English language teachers are encouraged to incorporate lessons directed by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) into their classrooms. As a result, understanding the theoretical framework of this important language teaching approach is critical.

Communicative competence, as was proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), has become one of the most influential Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. They provided a model of communicative competence in which four distinct elements interact and influence each other: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Díaz-Rico and Weed (2010) expressed that when a language user has communicative competence, they are able to know "when, when, and how to use language appropriately" (p. 58). The first element of the theory of communicative competence is referred to as grammatical/linguistic competence (Gao, 2001). The second, sociolinguistic competence, refers to sociocultural rules of how to use and respond to language properly, while the third, discourse competence, is concerned with being able to understand and use grammatical forms and meaning to function appropriately and effectively in a given language. Finally, strategic competence is the capacity of an individual to adjust their verbal and non-verbal language to cope with communication problems stemming from their lack of grammatical knowledge and/or knowledge of social behavior and communication rules. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed a framework for determining a language learner's communicative proficiency, which included strategic competence, grammatical competence, and sociolinguistic competence. These four areas function together in language production (Lyster, 1996). In recent years, however, scholars (e.g., Chen & Hwang, 2019; Farida & Sofwan, 2012; Rohmah, 2012) have emphasized the necessity of improving learners' communicative competence by developing learning strategies. Studies in learning strategy (LS) instruction demonstrate that this practice might make language learning easier. Learning strategies are "the conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners to help them better understand, learn, and remember the target language information" (Nakatani, 2010, p. 116). As Palmer and Christison (2018) mentioned, it is necessary for learners to develop strategic competence to become good communicators in English. In the wake of this, there has been a surge of academic interest in examining the effect of LSs on target language development (Alhaysony, 2017; Charoento, 2016; Habók & Magyar, 2018; Namaziandost et al., 2019; Oxford, 2016; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017). An important component of language LS training is found with speaking strategies. These have been defined as "first aid devices used for interaction and communication, to address problems or breakdowns, and to remain active in communication" (Chou, 2018, p. 611). Speaking strategies are essential, since on the one hand they provide foreign language learners with valuable tools to improve their speaking skills and aid them in successfully tackling the difficulties that may emerge in the process of communication (Pawlak, 2018); on the other hand; they help learners to communicate in the target language in diverse situations (Muhtarom & Masykuriyah, 2020). In the literature, oral strategies are mainly referred to as speaking strategies, communication strategies, or oral communication strategies.

The term communication strategy (CS) was coined by Sleinker (1972) and it was referred to as one of the five principal processes involved in L2 learning. Kongsom (2016) proposed a comprehensive definition of CSs and referred to them as "devices that learners use to enhance their negotiation of meaning as well as to convey their message while interacting with each other" (p. 41). Palmer and Christison (2018) explained that CSs are especially used "in the context of helping learners evaluate the language received, plan for and execute the language they want to produce, and evaluate how the language was received relative to the accomplishment of goals when learners have limited target language knowledge" (p. 4). Instead of CS, Nakatani (2006) used the term oral communication strategies (OCS) and referred to them as "those specifically focus on strategic behaviors that learners use when facing communication problems during interactional tasks" (p.152). Ellis (1993), however, asserted that the learner's proficiency level affects his

choice of strategy. This is also supported by various studies (e.g., Al-Qahtani, 2013; Charoento, 2016; Chen, 2009; Ghafournia, 2014; Habók & Magyar, 2018; Mistar & Umamah, 2014; Muhtarom, & Masykuriyah, 2020; Nakatani, 2005, 2006, 2010; Zhang, 2005) that suggest that the higher the proficiency level where the learners are, the greater the number of strategies they use, all of which makes it possible for them to complete language tasks more successfully.

Generally, it can be argued that CSs are among the main factors that help learners to maximize their communicative competence (Crossley & Kim, 2019; Forbes & Fisher, 2015; Rabab'ah, 2015). Although it could be of great help to EFL learners if these strategies can be integrated into English classes, in practice it seems that OCS instruction has not been given enough attention. The main reason could be the fact that they are not included in language teaching curricula. As such, there is a need for some kind of codification on the curriculum of language teaching in terms of the development of OCS so that learners gain the required speaking skills which can pave the way for their success in being a competent communicator in the context of the classroom and beyond. To date, most empirical studies on CSs have advocated the investigation of learners' use of CSs in relation to variables such as gender (e.g., Kaivanpanah et al., 2012; Lai, 2009; Tam, 2013), anxiety (e.g., Chou, 2018; Dewaele & Ip, 2013; Han, 2014; Liu, 2016; Liu, 2018; Liu & Thondhlana, 2015;), task types (e.g., Huang, 2013; Patil & Karekatti, 2015), learning context (e.g., Huang, 2018), learning style (e.g., Bromley, 2013; Wong & Nunan, 2011), and teaching pedagogy of CSs (e.g., Hmaid, 2014; Kongsom, 2016). However, though speaking strategies have mostly caught researchers' attention, little research can be found on the interaction of EFL learners' level of proficiency and their strategy use in the educational context of Iran. To this end, this study intended to bridge the gap in this research area and measure low and high proficiency learners' speaking strategy use.

Literature Review

Communication Strategies

Communication as the key component of interrelationships has been the primary concern of foreign language learning as it is the way learners experience the language (Huang, 2018; Rastegar & Mirzadi Gohari, 2016; Weyers, 2010; Zand-Moghadam & Aylar, 2020). In order to develop language skills and improve communication competence, learners can take advantage of CSs which are used to negotiate meaning (Tarone, 1980), overcome communicative disruptions, and improve interaction in the target language (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). CSs include a subset of language learning strategies, based on approaches for conveying information that is unfamiliar to the recipient (Cohen et al., 1995). The classification of CSs is mainly framed under two perspectives: the interactional view and the psycholinguistic view. The interactional approach to defining CSs was influenced by Tarone's (1980) work, which views CSs "as external devices learners used not only to resolve communication breakdowns but also to make communication more effective through the use of negotiation of meaning, self-repair and time-gaining strategies, which results in the construction of detailed classifications but also underlies the conviction that CSs are teachable" (Pawlak, 2018, p.273). Another approach to defining CSs, the psycholinguistic approach, was influenced by the work of Faerch and Kasper (1983) and Bialystok (1990), which emphasize "the mental processes that learners engage in when they experience a language deficit" (Pawlak, 2018, p. 273). According to this view, CSs are regarded as cognitive processes of the individual towards self-expression (Maleki, 2010). With regard to interactional and psycholinguistic approaches in defining CSs, it has been concluded that CSs should be considered both as problem-solving tools to cope with communication problems and as mechanisms for discourse functions for the negotiation of meaning (Kongsom, 2016).

In the literature there are different taxonomies for organizing and understanding CSs. In an early attempt, Rubin (1981) categorizes strategies as: verification, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization, and monitoring. Faerch and Kasper (1983) posited two taxonomies for organizing CSs: achievement vs. compensatory strategies and avoidance vs. reduction. The former enables learners to make use of all possible available sources to reach their goals, while avoidance strategies are used when learners avoid talking about topics of which they do not have enough knowledge. O'Malley and Chamot's study (1990) includes three dimensions of strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective strategies. In one influential body of research, Oxford (1990) developed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which divides strategies into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. Cohen et al. (1995) also hold the psycholinguistic view in CSs and categorize them into language learning strategies and language use strategies. They state that language

learning strategies are those that help learners to improve their target language knowledge while language use strategies encompass both communicative and performance strategies.

Nakatani (2006) classifies OCS as social-affective, fluency oriented, negotiation for meaning, accuracy oriented, message reduction and alteration, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempt to think in English. Since both interactional and psycholinguistic views are included in this classification, it creates a firm basis for investigating CSs. In relation to speaking skills, such strategies could include “predicting vocabulary to use in advance, paying attention to pronunciation while speaking and using feedback to create targets for future tasks” (Forbes & Fisher, 2015, p. 2). Although there are various taxonomies both on learning strategies and CSs, as Bialystok (1990) rightly argues, these classifications differ only in terms of terminology, and there is a specific group of strategies that appear in the literature continuously. It has been also discovered through research that frequent strategy use is linked to more efficient learning particularly in the EFL context (Adasheva & Tretter, 2013; Lan & Oxford, 2003; Rao, 2012). This is evident in the numerous studies evaluating the role of language proficiency in strategy use (Dewaele & Ip, 2013; Han, 2014; Liu, 2016). Although there is no agreement among studies on the order of strategy preference, they almost all agree that students with a high level of language proficiency use a greater number of CSs, more frequently, and in a different order than students with a low level of language proficiency (Chen, 2007; Dörnyei & Skehan 2003; Gan et al., 2004; Gavrilidou & Papanis, 2010; Psaltou-Joyce & Kantaridou, 2009; Sheu, 2009; Vrettou, 2011).

To recapitulate, as Uztosun and Erten (2014) point out, since speakers and interlocutors engage in both interactional and cognitive processes during communication, both interactional and psycholinguistic approaches should be taken into account when studying CSs. As a result, the current study used these two approaches as its theoretical frameworks to explore the CSs used by EFL learners in their specific context.

Related empirical studies on speaking skills

Given the crucial importance of CSs and their influence on educational systems as a whole, scholars (e.g., Pierce, 2019; Xu & Kou, 2018; Zerrouki & Al-Khanji, 2020) around the world have approached and investigated their efficacy from various perspectives in different educational contexts. Some studies (e.g., Goh & Burns, 2012; Hmaid, 2014; Lou & Xu, 2016; Moradia & Talebi, 2014; Arfaei Zarandi & Rahbar, 2016) have particularly investigated the effect of strategy training on learners’ academic performances. In one early study, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) made a comparison among three groups in an attempt to find out the efficacy of the strategies they had used while performing speaking tasks. The results indicated that the group that had been given explicit instruction in cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective strategies significantly outperformed the control group. Along the same line, Nakatani (2005) in his study revealed that speaking scores of learners who received speaking strategy instruction significantly improved. Studies by Hmaid (2014), Hua et al. (2012), and Kongsom (2016) also demonstrated a significant relationship between learners’ strategy use and their academic performance. The findings from these studies revealed that instruction in the use of CSs had a positive influence on language learners’ ability to communicate and enhanced their awareness of strategy use. The findings further showed that participants had a favorable attitude toward CSs instruction and that they perceived these techniques to be beneficial for enhancing their conversational skills.

Some research has also been conducted to explore the link between L2 proficiency and the use of certain strategies (e.g., Mei & Nathalang, 2010; Nakatani, 2006; Zhang, 2005). Rost and Ross (1991) referred to proficiency as the substantial predictor of strategy use. Along the same line, Shen and Chiu (2019) argued that successful learners tend to use a variety of speaking strategies to make their English speaking performance better. Nakatani (2010) also maintained that proficient L2 learners are more attentive to the use of strategies and employ them to fill the gaps in their communication, to negotiate meaning, and to enhance mutual understanding.

Using Oxford’s (1990) SILL questionnaire in their study, Gani et al. (2015) revealed that “high performance speaking students had better balance in using all kinds of learning strategies (memory, cognitive, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social) for enhancing their speaking skills than low performance speaking students” (p.17). However, a major limitation in this study is that the author did not take into consideration the strategies that high and low proficient learners use while speaking. Focusing on Japanese EFL learners, Nakatani (2006) in his study made a distinction between proficient and less proficient speakers in terms of using OCSs. He pointed out that proficient learners mostly employ social-affective, fluency-maintaining, and negotiation-for-meaning strategies. Unlike the study by Gani et al., (2015), Nakatani

(2006) used communicative tasks to elicit the strategies that learners employed in both speaking and listening. Likewise, Wu and Gitsaki (2007) and Chen (2009) investigated the relationship between English proficiency and the use of communication strategies among Taiwanese L2 learners and concluded that less proficient speakers employ *reduction* and *nonverbal* strategies more than the high proficiency learners did. Nevertheless, *fluency-maintaining*, *accuracy-oriented*, and *social affective* were used more frequently by the high proficiency learners. The same results were also obtained in Habók and Magyar (2018) and Ping and Luan's (2017) studies. They used the SILL to collect data and discovered a connection between English proficiency and the use of speaking strategies. Their research showed that less proficient learners used strategies to a medium extent, whereas proficient learners employed these strategies to a greater degree. Nevertheless, Habók and Magyar (2018) fail to describe in detail how the proficiency level of children was determined. Although they mention that they asked the participants, who were 11- and 14-year old learners, to self-report their English language mark, this does not seem to provide reliable information on their English language ability.

Similarly, the use of CSs in open-ended conversation tasks was investigated by Nakatani et al., (2012) . It was demonstrated that elementary-level students frequently used strategies that impeded their flow of communication. Advanced learners on the other hand, used a variety of strategies to keep the flow of interaction. Despite the fact that the authors made an effort to have a robust study, it seems that they did not consider the fact that the presence of the observer could potentially make the learners more anxious. This might make the results less reliable, especially because, as the authors acknowledge, there might be a link between learner anxiety and their speaking performance in general and communication strategies in particular. Taheri et al. (2020) used a mixed methods approach to investigate potential variations between more and less proficient language learners with respect to the frequency and nature of their language learning strategies. The SILL scale and a series of semi-structured interviews were administered to 120 Iranian EFL learners. The findings suggested that students with a high level of language proficiency mainly used compensatory, affective, and cognitive strategies, while students with a lower level of language proficiency relied more on social, metacognitive, and memory strategies. It is important to note that these authors employed SILL to collect the data, and as such caution should be taken as the learners might use different strategies while performing communicative tasks, as opposed to those they use in learning the language. Likewise, the findings from Muhtarom and Masykuriyah's (2020) study revealed that the students' ability to communicate has an impact on their speaking strategies. The students with low speaking ability spoke in a different way than those with a middle or high level. However, opposing results were obtained in the studies conducted by Chand (2014), Kabirzadeh Najafabadi (2014), and Razmjoo and Ghasemi Ardekani (2011) in which no significant relationship was found between EFL learners' level of proficiency and their speaking strategy use.

Additionally, some studies paid special attention to the role of gender in the use of speaking strategies. For instance, Tam (2013) conducted a study to examine the relationship between proficiency level, socioeconomic status, gender, and language learning strategies. In so doing, 50 first-year university students were asked to fill out the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) questionnaire. The results indicated that all these factors, i.e., proficiency level, socioeconomic status, and gender, have an impact on the use of language learning strategies. As was the case with most of previous research, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the strategies that students use while they communicate with others for the reason that SILL was employed as the instrument in the data collection process. In the same line, Mistar and Umamah (2014) reported that six strategy types (i.e., interactional-maintenance, self-evaluation, fluency-oriented, time gaining, compensation, and interpersonal strategies) greatly contribute to the female learners. Although the authors managed to use a large number of participants in their study, they only used a self-report to assess their speaking ability. Another point worth mentioning here is that they developed their instrument which they called Oral Communication Learning Strategy (OCLS) by deriving items from two other scales. Yet, they did not provide the statistical procedure through which they validated OCLS. Kaivanpanah et al.'s (2012) research with 227 Iranian EFL learners (89 males and 138 females of differing levels) also revealed that no significant gender correlation existed in the use of CSs except for circumlocution, asking for clarification, omission, comprehension check, and fillers. The researchers explained these differences by arguing that women are more interested in social activities than men. This study, however, suffered from the fact that the task effect was investigated only at the elementary proficiency level. Furthermore, this research did not probe the frequency of strategy use by proficiency level, which makes it difficult to reach conclusions on the relationship between communication strategy use and proficiency level.

Accentuating the importance of task-based strategy assessment as an approach toward obtaining a more precise record of language strategy use (Oxford et al., 2004), a number of researchers (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Rosas, 2018; Shtavika, 2018) contend that connecting language strategies to language tasks can bring about more exact appraisal of language learning and use strategies. For example, Zerrouki and Al-Khanji (2020) explored the effect of task types on the use of CSs in spoken discourse by 30 Algerian EFL learners. Audio recordings of scenario and interview tasks were used to collect data. The findings indicated that the task type influenced the choice and use of CSs mainly influenced by the interview. What is rather surprising in this study is that the scenario task has been intended for men as the respondent is required to convince their wife to move to another city, but the participants in their study consisted mainly (more than 90%) of female learners. It is not clear how this could affect their performance. The same results were obtained in Rosas' (2018) and Shtavika's (2018) studies. Data were collected by means of video and audio recordings, observation of participants' interactions, and stimulated recall methodology from thirty-six interactions between Spanish L2 learners and native speakers of Spanish. Rosas (2018) found that the task type has an impact on the use of CSs by learners. Nonetheless, she did not give the participants a proficiency test to determine their levels. Rather, she took into consideration their attendance to a specific language module. This also renders it difficult to assure the homogeneity of the participants, which can potentially influence the results, i.e., the use of different communication strategies. Similarly, Shtavika's (2018) research with twenty Kosovan and Bosnian English learners suggested that the task type and the level of proficiency affected the choice and the frequency of CSs in oral performances.

Concentrating on the issue of degrees of learner autonomy and use of strategies for speaking problems, Salehi et al. (2015) found that during the use of strategies for dealing with speaking problems, those learners who had lower grades in speaking were generally weaker in comparison with those with higher grades. It was also found that when compared to high proficiency learners, learners with lower speaking grades perceived themselves as less autonomous. The main weakness of this research was probably the fact that the authors used the self-reporting method to determine the strategies the participants used while speaking English as well as their degree of learner autonomy as an English language learner. They failed to use other methods such as observation to compensate for the shortcomings of self-report. In a study on Turkish EFL learners, Arpacı-Somuncu (2016) investigated the effects of willingness to communicate and cognitive flexibility on oral communication strategy use. Pearson correlation coefficients revealed that each variable had positive correlations with each other. Likewise, it was made evident that cognitive flexibility was the best predictor for almost each strategy employed in oral communication. In order to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-efficacy beliefs and anxiety level and their use of speaking strategies in communication, Shirkhani and Mir Mohammad Meigouni (2020) carried out a study on 160 intermediate Iranian EFL learners. The results showed "a significant positive relationship between OCSs and self-efficacy beliefs of the learners and a significant negative relationship between OCSs and their anxiety level" (p.1). However, given that anxiety can have different effects on students with various language proficiency levels, their results may not necessarily be the same for elementary and advanced students, as shown in the study below.

Focusing on low- and high proficient Chinese university students, Liu (2018) conducted a study to investigate the impact of English-speaking anxiety and strategy use on their oral English test performance. To this end, the OCSCI and the English-speaking anxiety scale (ESAS) were administered to 1092 students. Data was gathered from 178 low- and 214 high-proficient learners. The findings showed that strategy use correlated with different variables like anxiety and proficiency and that "low-proficient students were significantly more apprehensive of negative evaluation and speech communication than their high-proficient counterparts" (p.1). This study is one of few studies that has actually made an attempt to take anxiety into the equation to investigate how it can affect learners' use of communications strategy. Another strength of this study is that the author further managed to use both low- and high-proficiency learners as anxiety can influence these groups in a different manner, which was shown in the results to be the case.

Based on the review of studies related to the purpose of the current study, it can be concluded that regarding the use of speaking strategies, most of the studies have been conducted to investigate the various aspects of speaking strategies and their relationship between language proficiency (Kabirzadeh Najafabadi, 2014; Razmjoo & Ghasemi Ardekani, 2011; Taheri et al., 2020), gender (Kaivanpanah et al., 2012), autonomy (Salehi et al., 2015), self-efficacy and anxiety level (Shirkhani & Mir Mohammad Meigouni, 2020); however, the impact of task type on the choice and use of speaking strategies has been rarely investigated in the Iranian context. Therefore, to bridge this gap especially in the EFL context, this study first sought to

investigate the speaking task-specific strategies by low and high proficiency EFL learners. Then, it aimed to make a comparison between the strategies employed by the low proficiency students and those employed by their high proficiency counterparts. Finally, it examined the participants' view on the effectiveness of the speaking strategies and necessity of teaching them in English classes. To this end, this study intended to find answers to the following research questions:

1. *What speaking strategies do low and high proficiency EFL learners use in task-specific situations?*
2. *Is there any statistically significant difference between the speaking strategies used by low and high proficiency EFL learners in task-specific situations?*
3. *What are the perceptions of low and high proficiency EFL learners of the effectiveness of the speaking strategies and necessity of teaching them in English classes?*

Method

This study adopted the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to explore low and high proficiency EFL learners use of speaking strategy in task-specific situations (Creswell, 2011). In the quantitative phase, it initially strove to identify which speaking strategies low and high proficiency learners employed while performing the tasks and subsequently drew a comparison between the two proficiency levels in terms of strategy use. In doing so, participants in both groups filled out a questionnaire which measured the strategies they used while speaking. Following that, it qualitatively elicited the participants' perceptions of the efficacy of speaking strategies as well as the necessity, or the lack thereof, of incorporating them in language teaching. To this end, two open-ended questions were posed in the interview during which the participants shared their perceptions of the strategies they used while responding to the speaking prompts.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 23 low and 25 high proficiency EFL learners. This number of participants resulted in data saturation, after which no more participants were included in the study (Tracy, 2019). Although the number of participants was small, a large amount of data was collected from each individual participant, which made the data more reliable. The Quick Placement Test (QPT) was used to select the intended students. This placement test was employed in this study as it is a flexible test of English language proficiency developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL in 2001 to provide a reliable and efficient tool to determine learners' proficiency. Those whose scores fell between 0 and 29 were chosen as basic users, while their advanced counterpart's scores ranged between 48 and 60. This categorization was based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which identifies the scores 0-29 as A1/A2 and the scores 48-60 as C1/C2 (North, 2005). Forty-eight students participated for the first two research questions, while for the third research question, ten students (five students from each group) were randomly selected to answer the interview questions.

Instruments and Materials

Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI)

Nakatani's (2006) OCSI was adapted to collect the data about the speaking strategies utilized by the participants of this study. The original OCSI had two parts: the first part collected information about the strategies that learners used for coping with speaking problems and the second part consisted of certain strategies for coping with listening problems. In this study, however, attention was given only to the first part, which essentially deals with speaking. The first part of Nakatani's (2006) inventory consisted of 32 statements which required students to choose their appropriate responses among five items in a Likert-scale. For example, for the item "I change my way of saying things according to the context." participants need to specify the extent to which they use that strategy while speaking using the given scale (1. Never or almost never true of me, 2. Generally not true of me, 3. Somewhat true of me, 4. Generally true of me, and 5. Always or almost always true of me). The OCSI was adapted to suit the present study. The original OCSI had 32 items with eight categories, but because a few of the items and categories were irrelevant to this study, they were reduced to 24 items with six categories. More specifically, since the OCSI should be answered after performing language tasks, it was assumed that when the learners do the tasks, there is a listener as well. This was so because the questionnaire was originally designed for both listening and speaking. Nevertheless, the focus of this study was on speaking only, so the tasks were performed by the participants without the presence of a listener.

Two experts in the field were consulted about the validity of the modified questionnaire. They both confirmed that the omissions were based on a logical decision and that the new questionnaire was valid for the purpose of this study. Moreover, the modified OCSI was translated into Persian so that the participants of the pilot and main phase could understand it easily. After the translation was done, two experts in the field along with five EFL learners were consulted. They respectively confirmed that the translated items satisfactorily reflected those in the original version and that they were not ambiguous in any way.

The validity of the developed questionnaire was tested using the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with 108 students similar in characteristics to those in the main phase of the study. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was found to be 0.80 in the EFA results, which is higher than the suggested threshold of 0.6. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity also yielded significant results [$\chi^2(107) = 2963.175, p < .05$]. The communalities of the objects (proportion of item's variance explained by the extracted factors) were all greater than 0.4. Based upon these results, the factor analysis was run for all the 24 questions.

The composite speaking strategies score was tested using Principal Components Analysis (PCA). The six speaking strategy components were found to be loaded on only one factor, with an eigenvalue of 16.52, explaining 40.98 percent of the variance. PCA for the six components solution namely *Accuracy*, *Fluency*, *Social Affective*, *Message Abandonment*, *Message Reduction*, and *Thinking in English* explained 9.35%, 6.62%, 7.65%, 5.85%, 5.10%, and 6.41% of the variance, respectively. As such, a single-factor solution was identified. As a next stage, the reliability of the modified questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS. The result showed that the instrument was reliable with an Alpha of 0.85.

Interview

A retrospective interview was used in the study to garner the required qualitative data from the participants. The interview addressed the speaking strategies that the participants used during speaking tasks and whether speaking strategies should be taught in classrooms. The participants were asked to respond to the questions as completely as possible. The following are the two open-ended questions to which the participants were required to give their responses.

To what extent do you think the speaking strategies helped you in performing the speaking tasks? How?

Do you think that task activities should be applied in the classroom to teach speaking strategies? Why/why not?

Speaking Tasks

Two speaking tasks were used as prompts for the students to speak. They were required to spend about one minute for each task. The tasks were selected considering the level of the participants. Since elementary students constituted half of the participants, the task had to be simple enough for them so much so that they could do the task without too much pressure on them. Therefore, complicated topics were avoided. They could use simple adjectives and sentences for describing their favorite person and ideal city. The selected speaking tasks were as follows:

Describe your favorite person.

Describe your ideal city.

Data Collection Procedures

First, all participants in both qualitative and quantitative phases of the study were asked if they consented to take part in this study. Next, after giving them instructions on how to accomplish the task, they were presented with the speaking tasks. An audio recorder was used to record their responses to the tasks. Immediately afterwards, they were asked to fill out the OCSI questionnaire, followed by an interview session during which 10 participants (five low and five high proficiency students) were asked to give their opinions with regard to the interview open-ended questions in Persian. They were asked to respond to them as completely as they could. Their responses to the interview questions were also audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

As for the first and second research questions, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data with SPSS (version 22). Descriptive statistics included mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum, where the Mann-Whitney U test was used as an inferential measure to find any potential difference in the use of speaking strategies by low and high proficiency EFL learners. The Mann-Whitney U test is a non-parametric equivalent of the independent samples t-test that was considered inappropriate

based on the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test. Concerning the last research question, which was qualitative in nature, the interview data was transcribed and then coded based upon content analysis.

To code the data, the researchers followed certain stages. First, each researcher conducted a pilot coding of 25% of the verbal report transcriptions from each of the high and low proficiency student groups for measuring inter-coder reliability using the following formula.

$$\text{the inter-coder agreement percentage} = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{total number of codes}} \times 100$$

The inter-coder reliability was found to be 92.11%. Given that this reliability value exceeds 70%, it can be assumed that the reliability percentage between the two coders is satisfactory in this study. As a next step, the coders talked about and agreed on the differences. Finally, the researchers used descriptive statistics to answer the first research question. Moreover, to determine the significance of the variations between high and low achievers in their strategic behaviors in the second research question, the Mann-Whitney U Test was used.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question was about the use of speaking strategies by low and high proficiency EFL learners in speaking tasks. In order to answer this question, the mean of the students' responses for each of the categories in the questionnaire was calculated. Table 1 illustrates such results for advanced learners.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Accuracy	23	2.20	4.80	3.53	.64
Fluency	23	2.33	4.67	3.50	.65
Social Affective	23	2.20	5.00	3.34	.66
Message Abandonment	23	1.33	5.00	3.04	.92
Message Reduction	23	2.67	4.67	3.65	.55
Thinking in English	23	1.00	4.00	2.78	.70
Valid N (listwise)	23				

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of low proficiency learners' use of speaking strategies

As shown in Table 1, *message reduction and alteration* strategy was deployed by the elementary learners the most (mean = 3.65), whereas a *thinking in English* strategy was as the least frequently used (mean = 2.7). The second most frequently reported strategy was *accuracy-oriented* strategies with a mean of 3.53. *Fluency-oriented* strategies were next in terms of frequency (mean = 3.50). Finally, the fourth and fifth strategies that the elementary students used most were *social-affective* (mean = 3.34) and *message abandonment* (mean = 3.04), respectively.

The same procedures were followed for high proficiency learners. According to Table 2, the advanced learners employed *accuracy-oriented* strategies more often than the other speaking strategies (mean = 3.74). On the other hand, they made use of *message abandonment* strategies the least with a mean of 2.33. After *accuracy-oriented* strategies, the most frequently used strategies were *thinking in English* (mean = 3.52), *fluency-oriented* (mean = 3.50), *social/affective* (mean = 3.44), and *message reduction* (mean = 3.33).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Accuracy	25	1.80	4.60	3.74	.53
Fluency	25	1.67	5.00	3.50	.72
Social Affective	25	1.80	4.40	3.44	.73
Message Abandonment	25	1.00	4.00	2.33	.77
Message Reduction	25	2.33	5.00	3.33	.65
Thinking in English	25	2.00	5.00	3.52	.75
Valid N (listwise)	25				

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of high proficiency learners' use of speaking strategies

Research Question 2

The second research question was whether there is any statistically significant difference in speaking strategy use by low and high proficiency EFL learners. To fulfil this goal, the Mann-Whitney U test was used after finding out that the data sets were not normal in terms of distribution as checked by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test. Table 3 demonstrates the results following the administration of the Mann-Whitney U test on all the six components of speaking strategies in the modified OCSI questionnaire.

	Accuracy	Fluency	Social Affective	Message Abandonment	Message Reduction	Thinking in English
Mann-Whitney U	234.00	287.00	251.00	164.50	197.00	142.50
Wilcoxon W	510.00	612.00	527.00	489.50	522.00	418.50
Z	-1.11	-.01	-.75	-2.56	-1.89	-3.05
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.26	.99	.45	.01	.06	.00

Table 3: Results of Mann-Whitney U Test for low vs. high proficiency learners' speaking strategies

As illustrated in Table 3, of the six categories of speaking strategies, only *message abandonment* and *thinking in English* were found to be significantly different between low and high proficiency English learners. On the other hand, they made more or less similar use of other speaking strategies, namely *accuracy-oriented*, *fluency-oriented*, *social/affective*, and *message reduction and alteration*.

Research Question 3

This question was intended to elicit the participants' perceptions of the following questions:

1. To what extent do you think the speaking strategies helped you in performing the speaking tasks? How?
2. Do you think that task activities should be applied in the classroom to teach speaking strategies? Why/why not?

As stated earlier, five students at each proficiency level, i.e., low and high, were randomly chosen to respond to these questions as fully as they could. It should be mentioned here that the researcher used pseudonyms in place of the students' real names at their request to quote what they stated.

Regarding the first interview question, all ten students asserted that the strategies helped them with their speaking in one way or another. Bahareh, a low proficiency student, mentioned, "*I tried not to use the words that I'm not familiar enough with... Instead, I tried to use their synonyms about which I have more information.*" With respect to using familiar words, Sohrab, an advanced student, believed that, "*it is instinctive for people to use the words which are more familiar to them. Therefore, we should use the expressions over which we have more mastery in speaking.*"

Some of the respondents emphasized the attention they paid to the way they pronounced the words. For instance, Tanin, an elementary student, expressed her idea as follows:

I paid attention to the way I pronounced words since it is very important for me to pronounce correctly. After speaking, I referred to the dictionary to check the pronunciation of the words that I was not sure how to pronounce. And I tried to speak as clearly as possible.

Jafar, an advanced student, had a similar point of view. He said, "*I pay more attention to my pronunciation. Since I'm interested in American accent, I'm careful to speak like an American.*" Moreover, two of the students reported that they used simple words more since '*they are much easier to access.*'

Being an elementary student, Romina stated that the strategies helped her "*dare to speak.*" She added that they also make her "*willing to speak more.*" In contrast, Maryam, also an elementary student, had a different idea. She said, "*I could not use many of these strategies because my level is low and thereby have to concentrate on transferring the message only.*" Amin, who was an advanced student, said that when he was at the elementary level, he would consciously use most of these strategies. However, now as an advanced student, he speaks automatically and pays little conscious attention to those strategies.

As for the second question, nine out of the ten interviewees asserted that the speaking strategies should be taught in the classroom. Of the elementary learners, Fatemeh was of the opinion that the strategies should be taught because "*we should know how to speak, how to start speaking, and how to end it.*" Maryam agreed with strategy instruction on the grounds that "*it would motivate the students to speak more.*"

Similarly, Bahareh, criticizing the current high school classes for dedicating so much of their time to teaching grammar, stated that teachers should also teach speaking strategies since *“it [grammar] cannot help students dare to speak English.”*

Tanin stated that strategy instruction be mandatory rather than optional in English classes. She added that:

Students should be required to do the related tasks to ensure that they learn such strategies... Especially, teachers must teach their students to think in English. One of my teachers once told me this; ever since, I try to think in English and this has helped me speak better.

Of the advanced students, only Amirhossein was against teaching speaking strategies in the classroom due to the fact that *“it would not amount to much and it may even make the students speak too slowly.”* The other four students, however, believed otherwise. For example, Jafar expressed that *“for any language, the teacher should teach speaking strategies. Each session, the teacher can choose one or two strategies, first teach them, and then ask learners to use the strategies in their own sentences.”* Sohrab placed more importance on the syntax of any language by saying that *“the students must be taught those strategies that induce them to pay more attention to that aspect of language.”* Finally, Mehdi was of the belief that two of the strategies must be taught in classrooms: using simple sentences and enjoying speaking. Elaborating on his choices, he added that:

Regarding the former, we should avoid making things complicated, and speaking is no exception. As for the latter, when you [as a teacher] teach a student how to enjoy his/her speaking, he/she will automatically move forward in improving the speaking skill.

Discussion

The findings of the first research question indicated that high proficiency learners make use of a wide array of speaking strategies to utter accurate sentences in the light of their advanced interlanguage. Furthermore, it can be argued that their good command of English makes them pay greater attention to language accuracy since they are both inclined and “expected” to produce highly accurate utterances. These high proficiency learners employed *message abandonment* strategies the least. This stands to reason since they are at an advanced level and thereby are capable of communicating their intended meaning. Accordingly, they seldom abandon what they want to say. They have enough linguistic resources at hand to proceed with speaking their mind.

As for low proficiency students, on the other hand, it can be argued that having far fewer linguistic resources at their disposal, they are left with using simple expressions which are familiar to them. In a more specific sense, they critically suffer from lexical and syntactical restrictions limiting them to a handful of linguistic options. As such, when they strive to utter more complicated ideas, they find themselves at a loss to express themselves and are thus forced to change their intended meaning with one that is easier to communicate. Furthermore, learners at this low level of proficiency resort to their L1 more often. In this way, the native language comes to their aid to compensate for their deficiency in the English language. This is evident in that thinking in English entails a relatively good command of English. Without such a command, it would be too difficult for ideas to shape up in learners’ minds in English. The findings are in agreement with the results of studies such as Muhtarom and Masykuriyah, (2020), Nakatani et al. (2012), Rosas (2018), Shtavika (2018), Taheri et al., (2020) according to which students’ proficiency level influences their speaking strategies.

Based on the results of the Mann-Whitney U test, the low and high proficiency EFL learners employed speaking strategies in different ways while doing the speaking tasks. Therefore, it can be contended that level of proficiency is indeed an influential factor with respect to speaking strategy use. However, the results yielded in this study are somehow different from those in the literature. Contrary to studies such as Chand (2014), Kabirzadeh Najafabadi (2014), and Razmjoo and Ghasemi Ardekani (2011), which found that the speaking strategy use was not mediated by proficiency level of students, the present research found it to be otherwise. That is, two types of language strategies were determined by the level of proficiency of the learners. It cannot be argued, nonetheless, that the advanced students used more strategies than their elementary counterparts. In fact, the frequency with which they used speaking strategies was more or less the same. The type of the strategies they used, on the other hand, was different.

In general terms, the conclusion that the proficiency level is an influential factor in the use of speaking strategies is in line with many investigations (Al-Qahtani, 2013; Charoento, 2016; Habók & Magyar, 2018; Mei & Nathalang, 2010; Nakatani, 2010; Shen & Chiu, 2019); according to which more versus less proficient

language learners use language strategies differently. This fact is corroborated by the results yielded in the current study. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned studies also contend that learners who are more proficient use more strategies than less proficient learners. In the present investigation, it was found that advanced learners do not necessarily use more strategies compared to elementary learners. Rather, the two groups of students use different strategies with different frequencies. To be more specific, high proficiency learners employed the *thinking in English* strategy more. This seems logical in that, as mentioned earlier, low proficiency learners do not have a good enough command of English to enable them to think in English. These low-proficient learners resort to their mother tongue.

With regard to the *message abandonment* strategy, which is of the compensatory type, it was the low proficiency learners who employed it in greater frequency. This is also reasonable in that when these learners found themselves incapable of conveying their ideas, they often found themselves with no alternative but to give up their intended message. On the other hand, high proficiency learners enjoy sufficient linguistic resources available to carry on with their message, so they seldom wind up abandoning their original message. This is in line with the Strategic Competence component of Swain's Communicative Competence model, according to which L2 learners might opt to use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication because of poor competence or performance variables. A speaker should be able to modify his or her use of verbal and nonverbal language to address communication issues brought on by a lack of knowledge of proper grammar and/or lack of familiarity with social behavior and communication standards in order to exhibit strategic competence. Lower proficiency learners, due to their insufficient knowledge of the L2 language, will have to resort to this type of competence more frequently, in some cases they will have to abandon what they intended to communicate altogether. These results are in part in line with studies such as those of Chen (2009), Habók and Magyar (2018), Ping and Luan (2017), and Wu and Gitsake (2007). Low proficiency learners used reduction and nonverbal strategies more than the high proficiency learners. Nevertheless, it was also found that, *fluency-maintaining*, *accuracy-oriented*, and *social affective* strategies were used more frequently by the high proficiency learners compared with their low proficiency peers. In the present study, only the *accuracy-oriented* strategy was found to be used significantly more by high-proficient learners (Chen, 2009). This difference can be attributed to the difference in the status of the use of the English language in Iran where the present study was carried out. Since there are fewer opportunities for English learners to speak with English natives for various reasons, the mention of which is beyond the scope of this paper (for a comprehensive discussion of this issue see Borjian, 2013), it can be argued that they tend to pay less attention to speech fluency. In contrast, Wu and Gitsaki and (2007) Chen's (2009) research were set in Taiwan, where there are many international business corporations, which have given rise to numerous formal and informal opportunities, such as frequent contact with foreigners at work (Rimmer, Chen, & Hsieh, 2011).

Nakatani (2006), after developing the OCSI, examined the applicability of the survey instrument in a simulated communicative test using 62 EFL students. The test involved a travel agency vignette to role-play. Immediately after performing the task, the participant filled out the questionnaire. According to the findings, students that are more proficient used more *social/affective*, *fluency-oriented*, and *meaning-negotiation* strategies than did their less proficient peers. The results of the current research are somewhat in contradiction with those of Nakatani (2006). First, the context in which Nakatani carried out his study was Japan, an internationally friendly country for EFL learners, while the present study was conducted in Iran where there are few foreigners, let alone English natives, due to Iran's cultural and political orientations (Borjian, 2013). Second, the nature of the task was different from the one used in the present study. Nakatani (2006) used a role-play task that entailed the participants focus more on conveying the message in their oral communications with one another. In the current study, on the other hand, the students responded to a speaking prompt requiring them to describe their favorite person and their ideal city in the form of a monologue. In effect, there was no interaction of any kind to induce the learners to communicate the message. Instead, they tended to produce as accurate utterances as possible, which was more evident with high proficiency students.

By and large, low and high proficiency EFL learners did not substantially differ in terms of the number of speaking strategies they utilized during responding to the tasks. As for the strategy types, nonetheless, high proficiency students reported more frequent use of *thinking in English* compared with their low proficiency peers. In contrast, *message abandonment* was the strategy that they resorted to more frequently than high proficiency learners. This demonstrates the importance of thinking in English because it helps learners form their ideas in English directly, sparing them the added task of translating from L1 to English.

Conclusion and Implications

Speaking in English in EFL contexts has always been a challenge due to the fact that EFL learners do not have enough opportunities to practice speaking. Speaking strategies are regarded as tools to deal with various problems in oral communications. This study sought to explore the speaking strategies used by low and high proficiency learners in an EFL context. According to the findings, it turned out that elementary and advanced learners use speaking strategies differently. The great majority of the interviewed participants believed that the strategies helped them a great deal in performing the speaking tasks and that they must be part of language instruction in English classes. Based on the results of the study, several implications are offered.

The findings of the study provide EFL learners with opportunities to raise their awareness of the relationship between their use of strategies and success in the process of language learning. The results also help students become independent and motivated learners by enabling them find alternative means to overcome gaps in their linguistic knowledge. Language teachers are also suggested to take into consideration learners' target language proficiency based differences. In other words, instructors should focus on the strategies used by high proficiency learners in the acquisition of speaking skills to help low proficiency ones compensate for their shortcomings. Thus, language teachers are required to familiarize their students with speaking strategies and encourage them to draw on effective strategies when encountering communication problems. In so doing, instructors should provide their students with efficient oral stimulated real-life tasks. The results of the current study can also be an invitation for material developers and syllabus designers to design and develop materials and textbooks in which speaking strategies are taken into account.

Although the present study has yielded findings that have both theoretical and pedagogical implications, it has from some limitations. The OCSI, originally developed to measure oral communication strategy use, was modified to suit the purpose of this study. Its validation, however, was only limited to experts' confirmation. Further, task difficulty was not built into the study either. According to Oxford et al. (2004), task difficulty can potentially impact on the types and frequencies of language strategy use as reported by learners and thus might significantly alter the resultant findings. For this reason, further research is recommended to address this issue by probing whether task difficulty mediates reported speaking strategy use. Other research studies can also shed light on this area by exploring the effect of speaking strategy instruction on speaking performance. Such an experimental study can help make more robust claims about the impact of speaking strategies.

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