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Language Learning Strategy Use and Proficiency in Speaking of ESL Students at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University

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Abstract
This paper addressed 46 students' speaking strategy use at a Vietnamese university. The aims of the study were to survey students' speaking strategies and the influence of proficiency on the number of used strategy items and frequency of strategies. The analysis indicated that social-affective strategies were most frequently used, while metacognitive strategies were least frequently used. Additionally, both good and poor students utilized many strategies in speaking but good students used strategies more often than poor ones. The findings from this study were discussed and implications were provided.

Keywords: Language learning strategy use, speaking proficiency, ESL students

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I. Introduction

For the last two decades, interests in learner differences has led to considerable attention and research on learners', especially good language learners', language learning strategies (LLSs) (Huong, 2007). As what Chamot (2005, p. 112) argues, examination of learners' LLSs can help us gain insight into metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective strategies of L2 learners and based on that insight, we can help less-successful students become better language learners by teaching new strategies.

Hence, an exploratory study was conducted to examine EFL students' LLSs at a university in Vietnam so as to gain a better insight of their L2 learning process. However, it focused on speaking strategies and proficiency of students since recent surveys about Vietnamese students' English proficiency have revealed that a large number of students cannot communicate verbally in English after several years of English learning (Lien, 2006; Nhat, 2006). The outcome of this research will be expected to help teachers better understand students' speaking strategies and based on it possibly teach more-proficient learners' effective strategies to less-proficient learners to enhance these learners' speaking skill.

II. Literature Review

Learning strategies are procedures that facilitate learning and are conscious and goal-driven (Chamot, 2005, p. 112). By Scarcella and Oxford (1992)'s definition, LLSs are "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques -- such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning (cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 359). Oxford (1990, p. 8) claims that LLSs make learning "easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations". Appropriate use of LLSs, therefore, results in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence (Oxford, 1990 cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 172). As Hismanoglu (2000, n. p.) records, LLSs have been identified and categorised by many researchers (e.g. Wenden & Rubin, 1987; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1992; Ellis, 1994), yet the most widely accepted grouping seems to have been O'Malley & Chamot's (1995) classification into metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective strategies (Huong, 2007, n. p.).

LLSs vary widely within individual learners and for the last two decades, numerous studies have contributed to the understanding of what strategies learners use and what factors affect these choices. Of all the learner factors, the relationship between the use of LLSs and L2 proficiency has been the focus of considerable research over the last years (Oxford, 1989; Rubin, 1987, cited in Yang, 2007, n. p.).

One of them is the study conducted by Griffiths (2003) involving 348 students in a private language school, New Zealand. Results of study found that frequency of LLSs use was related to proficiency, and more proficient students used a large number of LLSs more often than less proficient students (p. 206). On investigating the use of LLSs of 175 tertiary-level Chinese students in classes of intensive English at the

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Goh and Foong (1997) discovered that higher-level Chinese students used cognitive and compensation strategies more frequently than lower-level students (p. 49).
However, much previous research has investigated mainly the relationship between LLSs and overall proficiency, but little work focused on specific language skill areas, especially speaking (Griffiths, 2003; Goh & Foong, 1997; Liu, 2004; Wafa, 2003, etc.). By investigating Vietnamese students' strategy use in speaking, this study addressed this gap.
The following is considered a framework to discover students' language learning strategy use and English speaking proficiency.

A.	Metacognitive strategies: 'higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity' (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, 44)	advance organizers: planning the learning activity in advance - "You review before you go into class".
		directed attention: deciding to concentrate on general aspects of a learning task.
		selective attention: deciding to pay attention to specific parts of the language input or the situation that will help learning.
		self-management: trying to arrange the appropriate conditions for learning - "I sit in the front of the class so I can see the teacher".
		advance preparation: planning the linguistic components for a forthcoming language task
		self-monitoring: checking one's performance as one speaks - "Sometimes I cut short a word because I realize I've said it wrong".
		delayed production: deliberately postponing speaking so that one may learn by listening "I talk when I have to, but I keep it short and hope I'll be understood".
		self-evaluation: checking how well one is doing against one's own standards
		self-reinforcement: giving oneself rewards for success
B.	Cognitive strategies	repetition: imitating other people's speech overtly or silently.
		resourcing: making use of language materials such as dictionaries.
		directed physical response; responding physically 'as with directives'.
		translation: 'using the first language as a basis for understanding and/or producing the L2'
		grouping: organising learning on the basis of 'common attributes'.
		note-taking: writing down the gist etc of texts.
		deduction: conscious application of rules to processing the L2.
		recombination: putting together smaller meaningful elements into new wholes.
		imagery: visualising information for memory storage - "Pretend you are doing something indicated in the sentences to make up about the new word".
		auditory representation: keeping a sound or sound sequence in the mind - "When you are trying to learn how to say something, speak it in your mind first".
		key word: using key word memory techniques, such as identifying an L2 word with an L1 word that it sounds like.
		contextualisation: 'placing a word or phrase in a meaningful language sequence'.
		elaboration: 'relating new information to other concepts in memory'.
		transfer: using previous knowledge to help language learning - "If they're talking about something I have already learnt (in Spanish), all I have to do is remember the information and try to put it into English"
		inferencing: guessing meanings by using available information - "I think of the whole meaning of the sentence, and then I can get the meaning of the new

		word".
		question for clarification: asking a teacher or native for explanation, help, etc.
C:	Social Mediation strategies:	cooperation: working with fellow-students on language

III. Methodology

Research Questions

1) What kind of language learning strategies do third-year students use for speaking?
2) How do the number and frequency of speaking strategies vary with students' proficiency?

Subjects

The 46 third-year sample students were recruited randomly from different three classes at Ba Ria-Vung Tau University. The first class consisted of 12 students (7 females, 5 males), the second one 15 students (6 females, 9 males) and the third 19 students (11 females, 8 males). They all have studied English at least for 7 years and now are majoring in English.

Data collection

Questionnaires were designed to explore students' speaking strategies and the relationship between proficiency and strategy frequency because questionnaires allow flexibility in distributing and collecting responses (McDonough, J. & McDonough, S. 1997, pp. 171-172). The questionnaires included 29 closed-response and 2 open-response questions. These 29 questions were thought out based on a list of strategies of O'Malley and Chamot (1990, cited Cook, 2008, n. p.) because it provided a detailed and easy-to-understand description about kinds of strategies and substrategies. Besides, there was an extra reference from SILL of Oxford (1990) because SILL is the most widely used instrument to assess LLSs and has been extensively field-tested for reliability and validated in multiple ways (Oxford & Burry-Stock 1995, cited in Liu, 2004). However, SILL represents a set of LLSs across all skills but not only speaking. Moreover, some items in SILL easily lead ESL readers to various interpretations according to situations, thereby possibly affecting reliability (Griffiths, 2003, p. 66). Accordingly, only strategy items suitable for the context of the current study are adapted from SILL.

Data analysis

The information from the questionnaires was entered onto the database (Excel program) for analysis. The mean and percentage of each strategy and each substrategy were calculated across all students. A Pearson product-moment correlation co-efficient and Independent Sample T-test were applied to estimate the relationship between EFL proficiency and strategy use.

IV. Results

All students took an oral test for speaking in the last second-semester exam. Scores were ranked from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 10. Through their total scores, the learners were divided into two levels of proficiency: high, low. Students with points of 7, 8, 9 were ranked into high level, students with points of 6, 5, 4 into low level. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of students at each level.

Table 1: Students' Proficiency

Proficiency level	Number	Percentage
High	21	45.6%
Low	25	54.3%

To understand speaking strategies used by overall university students, in the fourpoint Likert-scale, 'Sometimes', 'Often', 'Always' were categorized into 'Yes' group, and 'Never' was into 'No' group.

Chart 1: Students' speaking strategy use

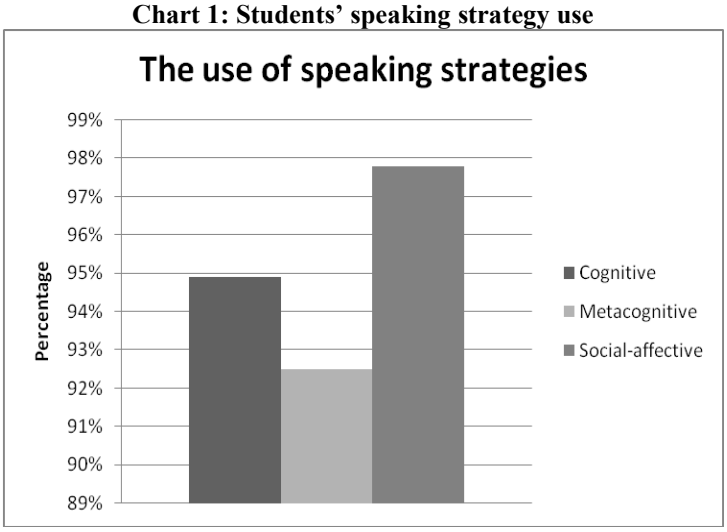

Chart 1 presents overall students' strategy use. As shown in chart 1, students reported using social-affective strategies most with 97.8%, followed by cognitive (94.9%) and metacognitive strategies (92.5%).

Chart 2: The use of strategies between groups

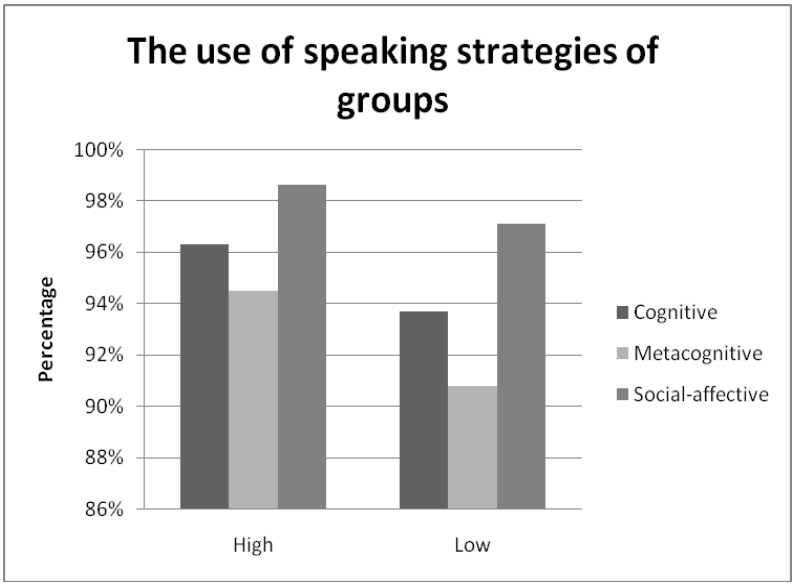

Chart 2 displays the number of employed strategy items according to proficiency. The percentages above show that both good and poor students used several strategies in speaking. Apparently, if high-proficient students employed cognitive to 96.3 %, metacognitive 94.5% and social-affective strategies 98.6%, the low-proficient also use to 93.7% of cognitive, 90.8% of metacognitive, and 97.1% of social-affective strategies. The data from T-test proves that there was no significant difference between the amount of used strategy statements and proficiency.

Table 2: The frequency of strategy use

Strategies	High (21)		Low (25)		T test	df	Sig. (two-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t		P
Cognitive	3.16	0.73	2.42	0.70	3.52	44	0.05
Metacognitive	2.89	0.83	2.47	0.76	1.79	44	0.05
Social-affective	3.19	0.76	2.53	0.63	3.22	44	0.05

Table 2 summarizes the frequency of speaking strategies according to proficiency. It is apparent from table 2 that better students reported higher frequency of strategy use than poorer students. Among strategies, the most frequently used strategy for both groups was social-affective strategy with 3.19, 2.53 respectively. While for high-level students, cognitive strategies (3.16) are utilized more frequently than metacognitive strategies (2.89), for low-level students, cognitive strategies (2.42) are applied less frequently than metacognitive strategies (2.47). Additionally, results of Independent Sample T-test show that the difference in frequency of cognitive and social-affective strategies between good and poor students was found to be statistically significant (Cognitive: $t=3.52$, $df=44$, $p<.05$; Social-affective: $t=3.22$, $df=44$, $p<.05$). Yet, there is no significant difference of metacognitive strategies due to the students' proficiency ($t=1.79$, $df=44$, $p<.05$).

Table 3: Correlation between strategies and proficiency

Strategies	N	Correlation	Sig. (two-tailed)
Cognitive	46	0.73	.01
Metacognitive	46	0.43	.01
Social-affective	46	0.61	.01

Table 3 describes the direction and degree of the relationship between strategy frequency and proficiency. Based on the data, strategy frequency and proficiency had a positive and fairly significant correlation. This means that students' frequent use of strategies increased with their proficiency and vice versa. Among all types, cognitive strategies had the closest correlation with proficiency ($r=.73$, $p<.01$, $n=46$) and the next was social-affective strategies ($r=.61$, $p<.01$, $n=46$). The poorest correlation was found between metacognitive strategies and proficiency ($r=.43$, $p<.01$, $n=46$).

V. Discussion

The result of the study about overall students' strategy use reveals that generally students had a high level of the strategy use in speaking. This is a good sign because it seems that they paid a positive attention to speaking as well as the development of this skill. It is worthy noting that social-affective strategies were adopted more than all the other types of strategies. The above finding infers that Vietnamese students have just become aware of the importance of social-affective strategies in speaking. "Social-affective strategies are the strategies that help learners regulate and control emotions, motivations, and attitudes towards learning, as well as help learners learn through contact and interaction with others" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, cited in Chou, 2004, n. p.). So, these strategies are beneficial for solving problems by cooperation with other persons and lowering or controlling anxiety in speaking (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, cited in Chou, 2004, n. p.). However, the outcomes of the studies conducted by Chamot and Küpper (1989) or Goh and Kwah (1997) pointed out that Asian students rarely adopted social-affective strategies in speaking skill (cited in Chou, 2004, n. p.). This result, therefore, will contribute to the variety in research regarding Asian students' speaking strategies. Furthermore, the study discovers that cognitive strategies were used more frequently than metacognitive strategies. And some previous researchers (Chamot & Küpper, 1989; Goh & Kwah, 1997, as cited in Chou, 2004, n. p.) also found such similar results.

The investigation about the number of used strategies according to proficiency indicates that there was no effect of proficiency on the number of used strategy items. The number of micro-strategies adopted by better learners was approximately equal with the one by weaker students.

With regards to the effect of proficiency on frequency of strategies in speaking, this study also harvests findings among which is that students' speaking proficiency and the frequent use of cognitive and social-affective strategies were correlated positively and strongly. It means that the higher a learner's proficiency was, the more frequently these strategies were used and vice versa. Yet, the significant difference was not found between metacognitive strategies and proficiency. Besides, social-affective strategies were the most often used strategies by both groups. This means that students escaped from scare in speaking and became more confident in interacting with lecturers and peers. It is also necessary to mention that while weak students relied more on planning, monitoring, or evaluating to help themselves gain confidence in speaking, good students implemented more cognitive strategies.

Obviously, learning strategies will be beneficial for promoting ESL students' speaking competence as what Chamot (1993, cited in Chou, 2004, n. p.) concluded through the outcomes of the studies of O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, and Küpper in 1989.

VI. Conclusion

This study aims at examining the speaking strategy use of Ba Ria-Vung Tau University students. It reveals that students on the whole applied a large number of strategies for speaking and social-affective strategies marked at the highest level. However, the use of many strategy statements did not reflect the difference in proficiency because lower-proficient students reported using as many strategy items as higher-proficient students. The study also found that poor students applied strategies infrequently, especially cognitive and social-affective strategies while good students did regularly.

Apparently, these findings suggested that learning strategy played an important role in gaining fluency in speaking. Therefore, it is essential to train or foster students to use a wide range of strategies. The teacher, however, should make students to become aware of the importance of the frequent use of strategies since the high-proficient students reported the very frequent use of LLSs. Furthermore, the teacher may introduce strategies used most frequently by more successful students to less successful students in order that hopefully they might enjoy benefits from those effective strategies.

Like other studies, the current study also has its own limitations, firstly among which might be that its subjects were confined to the university level. Furthermore, it investigated only a certain number of students of English. Finally, this study was conducted according to the quantity method. Hence, future research should consist of students in secondary and high schools or university students with different majors. And it should use the quality method to examine students' use of LLSs.

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